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JOURNEY  
DOWN A  
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## PART ONE





## PART ONE



### CHAPTER I

#### I

THERE is a house in the center of France where my thoughts, however troubled, can always find rest; and another in Paris, in the old quarter on the left bank of the Seine, that is often recalled to my mind in London because we brought with us some of the things in it that we liked best, when we left. Our old Chinese rugs and Louis XV *bergères* with their fine faded needlework came from the drawing room in the Faubourg St. Germain and Houdon's Voltaire stood on its slender marble column at the top of the stairs. It is a plaster of the period with a lovely *patine*; we bought it in Tours for a few francs. It had been lying for years in the cellar of a convent, but the good sisters had only discovered shortly before we came whose the head was and had thrown the infidel out just in time for us.

The château is small and very old, it is in the wine country. It belongs to some French cousins and stands beside a river east of Auxerre and not far from the ancient Abbey of Vesley. The Black Prince marched up the valley long ago, more recently a human flood poured down the road from Paris fleeing from the Germans; but when B. and I were married in 1918 Cousin Gaston and Sis were still there and it seemed to them the most natural thing in the world to extend to me the welcome they had given him ever since he was a small boy.

We went to France almost every year between the two wars for the Easter recess and summer holidays, making many short trips to Paris as well. Whenever he could get away B. would be off across the Channel and every spring I would see the same look in his eyes and know that he was longing to go back to V——.

Cousin Gaston and Sis were distant cousins but did not seem so. The connection was through B.'s Irish grandmother. Sis came from Kildare County. She was a timid pretty little old lady when I met her with soft gray hair and wistful eyes. Though she had lived for many years in France and borne her husband two sons, she had clung always to her Irish family and prevailed on them to spend many weeks of each year at V——.

It was a wonderful place for children. The river was a full placid stream

abounding in fish. The hills rising steeply on the far side were thickly wooded. There was an ancient tower in the garden fitted up as a carpenter shop where Gaston would teach the boys to make all manner of useful things and impart much gentle Old World wisdom.

B.'s grandmother used to come over with him from Ireland and settle in for the summer. She was a formidable old lady even when I knew her at the end of her life. She died in 1920 and is buried at V——. She lies in the churchyard on the little hill south of the village beside Sis and Gaston. She must have been tremendous in her young days when she lived with them through the siege of Paris. A stalwart, autocratic, self-willed Irish woman who loved France and her French cousins but never spoke more than a few words of execrable French.

Cousin Gaston was already growing old in 1918. He always wore a brown corduroy jacket with antler horn buttons. His beard was white, his fine fleshy face too pale, his body a little too heavy for his fragile legs, but he would come hurrying to meet me with short uncertain steps, take both my hands in his and kiss me lightly first on one cheek then the other, with an exquisite tender Old World courtesy that I have not met with very often. It was because of him that I long ago came to share B.'s feeling that we had a home in France.

The house in Paris was another thing altogether. We moved into it at the end of the First World War when we were married, and made it into the kind of house that we liked. It was very attractive and rather absurd. It didn't give on the street—you drove or walked through a tunnel under an *immeuble*, found the front door in a courtyard and mounted an imposing staircase to enter a suite of rooms, neither large nor imposing, that gave on a garden with other gardens beyond.

A gay little house, like a Normandy manor; we painted the library walls a deep green and filled the bookshelves with a medley of old volumes picked up on the *quais* or new volumes bound by the *Mutilés de la Guerre*. We found an old red-lacquer writing table in the Rue des St. Pères to go in the window, deep armchairs to go to either side of the chimney piece. The paneled drawing room was the color of tarnished gold, and reflected faintly the shimmer of sunlit trees in the garden. A tiny winding staircase led down to a long music room; another outside led to the garden with its lilacs and laburnums. A nightingale used to come each summer and sing there. We kept open house during the Peace Conference and the staircases were often crowded with gay attractive friendly people. A house full of color and music and laughter.

But all this came after the war of 1914-1918. It was the war that had taken



me to France. I had spent it with the French Army, had met B. for the first time during the Battle of the Somme, and we had given up the house in Paris in '21 to come home to England, when he resigned his commission, thinking that the world would have peace at least for his lifetime. But now in '39 we were at war again, and to the word "war," my answer was France. Instantly, inevitably, twenty-five years of crowded life were as if they had never been and a great wave of emotion out of the past swept me back to the France of 1914.

Dunkirk, a dingy hostelry in a cobblestone square filled with dapper French officers in sky-blue tunics and scarlet breeches. It is warm, its beds are enormous and soft and deep; the smell of succulent food pervades its stuffy corridors. A siren screams from the church tower, there is a confused scramble for the cellars, a tram making along the windy beach to the ugly suburb of Malo-les-Bains stops; and out on the sands a swarm of tiny figures fall flat on their faces like frantic worshipers; Big Bertha, the great gun beyond the sand dunes in Belgium, is shelling the town.

Convoys are lumbering along the road to Poperinghe and Ypres. Columns of men in heavy gray-blue coats that are too big for them are staggering across the mud of Flanders, a woman in a gray army cape turns into a sodden field outside the village of Ruysbroek, between gateposts that carry a sign marked "*Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1.*" The woman is myself. I cannot see her face, but I can see the rows of wooden sheds that house the wounded, the nurses in their white caps hurrying from one to another, and the small square hut in the center of the compound that was my home.

That was the World War—the war to end war. We were young in those days and full of nonsense. But how strange to realize now looking back that when I landed on the quay at Dunkirk in 1914 I could not look forward and observe what was to happen there twenty-five years later. How frightening to think that when I took the tram each day along the beach to the derelict casino at Malo-les-Bains no glimmer shone back out of the future to my tiny present to reveal what that beach was to witness of disaster and heroism.

"We will fight on the beaches."

Winston Churchill knew no more than I in those days what Dunkirk was to stand for in history. He was at the Admiralty planning Gallipoli, and my husband, whose existence was unknown to me, was lying wounded in a London nursing home having done the retreat from Mons in liaison with General Lanrezac and the Battle of the Marne with Franchet d'Esperey.

It is fascinating and instructive to contemplate in retrospect one's minute blind burrowing progress through the dark night of events which we imagine

to have been vivid and luminous. I see myself as a very small mole nosing its way with comic assurance through the roaring gloom of that old war zone. And then, presto, I am at it again doing precisely the same thing in exactly the same way in a new, different, but even more terrible war. And so, though I gained much useful experience in the first that stood me in good stead in the second, by way of wisdom I would seem to have acquired less than nothing.

And now that both wars are over they tend already to blend into one. Soon, if I am not careful, I shall confuse their events, mistake the road I followed in 1916 on my way down from Flanders to the Somme for one I took in 1940 from Paris to Lorraine, or transpose frail Miss Warner with her eye-glasses and gray hair who came to Dunkirk from Philadelphia in 1915 as my head nurse and put her down on her slender feet in one of the wards at St. Jean le Bassel behind the Maginot Line. What more natural? Miss Warner, if she still lives, is old, but the valiant women who answer the call of pain, disease and death are all like her; the giant poplars lining the roads of France are the same today as yesterday; the soil of France does not change, and her fields, her rivers, her forests are timeless as human beings mark time.

## II

I could not tell a coherent story if I would of my life in the French Army during the First World War. But it is right to evoke those days for a moment, for they are the introduction to my work with the French troops during the five years just ended. If I had not gone to the front with a mobile hospital in 1914, if I had not carried with me in my heart during the long interval a fadeless memory of the poilus of 1914-1918, I would not have longed so passionately to rejoin them nor leaped at the chance when it offered.

The early adventure began almost by accident. I had no thought of organizing a field hospital when I put my name down with the London Committee of the French Red Cross and was summoned to the presence of its president, La Vicomtesse de la Panouse.

Had I done any nursing?

No.

Did I speak French?

A "little."

There was a typhoid epidemic in Dunkirk, was I willing to nurse typhoid? After a moment's hesitation, once more, yes.

Madame de la Panouse watched me out of a bright black eye, with the

hint of an ironical smile touching her lips. A powerful woman. The *Service de Santé* she explained had been prepared for twenty-five thousand casualties; the sick and wounded already numbered half a million. Nurses were urgently needed in Dunkirk. But—well—there were difficulties. The French military authorities were not eager to introduce English nurses into their hospitals. My role would be to break down their prejudice and persuade them to allow us to nurse their sick. Would I go, taking two hospital nurses with me at my own expense?

Yes.

Very well. I had best leave as soon as possible. I would find conditions, she added as she said good-by, somewhat primitive.

A plump hand waved me off, wafted me as if by magic to Dunkirk. I found myself with my two nurses at the end of that windy tramway and stumbled into a place of nightmare. The dilapidated casino of Malo-des-Bains had been turned into a makeshift typhoid hospital of 250 beds.

The sick lay helpless under the great tarnished chandeliers of the gaming rooms, the rows of dingy beds were reflected to infinity in the vast gilded mirrors. There were no nurses until we arrived and nothing to nurse with; no feeding cups, no urinals, no bedpans. Even the dying must crawl out of bed and sit on open pails. The wind howled up the beach beyond the great windows but the stench in the rooms made one vomit. I would run every so often behind my screen to be sick, go for a moment to one of the broken panes in the glass veranda to breathe the fresh salt air from the sea, then hurry back to that dim purgatory of gaunt heads, imploring eyes and clutching hands.

We did what we could for them. My nurses told me what to do and I did it to the best of my ability. But it was a heartbreaking business. French army regulations forbade us to nurse at night; the overworked orderlies on night duty would fall asleep and each morning we would find that one or more of the men we had pulled through the day before had died in the dark.

This went on for some weeks, then a visiting inspector's question broke me down. A kind old man. It distressed him to see me cry. There—there, he patted my heaving shoulder. Would I like to have a hospital of my own? Yes. Oh yes. Very well, if I would write a letter to the commander in chief he would send it on. What? Write to General Joffre? But yes, why not? Why not indeed?

I hurried back that night to my billet in the *Chapeau Rouge* and dashed off a letter to General Joffre on a sheet of hotel note paper offering on certain conditions to equip a field hospital of a hundred beds for the French Army.

Four months later the huts of *L'Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No. 1* were set up in a field in Flanders outside the village of Ruysbroek.

The conditions I put were few. I mention them because they proved wise and because I have repeated the formula twice during this war. Once to General Gamelin, once to General de Gaulle. I would give the complete equipment of a surgical hospital of 100 beds on the understanding that the French Army would take it over as a military unit, provide the officers, N.C.O.'s and orderlies and appoint me as *directrice* with absolute authority over all women employed in the hospital and the right to recruit my own nurses. That was all, but it was enough. With my own position recognized by French G.H.Q. and the right to choose my nurses, I was confident that the hospital would be a success. If it was not, the fault would be mine.

An Anglo-French unit under French command; a French C.O., a British *directrice*, French surgeons, doctors, chemists and administrative officers, British and American nurses. The formation was unique, an experiment that was watched by envious eyes and expected to fail: it didn't fail, it grew out of all recognition. Beginning with a dozen nurses, British, Australian, New Zealand and American; we ended the war with fifty, half of them French. Our first station was a pleasant affair of neat huts standing firmly in a green field, then suddenly I was in a vast enclosure resembling a lumber camp surrounded by seas of yellow mud.

I don't remember how I got to Bray-sur-Somme in 1916 but the scene is vivid. I imagine that I can still hear the thunder of the guns, the endless rumble of trucks passing our flimsy hospital gate, and smell the smell of gas gangrene that pervaded so many of the gaunt wooden sheds. I see myself sitting in my cubicle with sodden feet on my iron stove. My apron is stained with mud and blood; I am too tired to take it off. My feet are burning lumps as I hobble to open the door. A young officer stands there. He too is bespattered with mud; his face is haggard. He introduces himself. He is Captain Spears of the XIth Hussars, liaison officer with General Fayolle, our army commander.

The day came rushing out of the past on that silent morning of September 3, 1939, filling my London room with its roar, its mixture of romance and horror. They were shelling the Corby crossroads and the shells were screaming over our heads. Captain Spears had been up to the front line to try to locate a British company that had been lost in the mud. He had stopped on his way back to see if he could be of use to the woman who had found her way to this ugly section of the French lines. I gave him tea. He went away again as he had come through the wind, under the cracking sky. I lost him. The battle surged over us. But he turned up again behind the



Chemin des Dames where I was sent in 1917 for the Neville offensive. And we were married in Paris in March, 1918.

I do not know how many wounded passed through our hands during those years of unparalleled slaughter. I remember the good priests who worked with us in our wards and fought with us to save the lives of our men. And I remember the old ones, the old *Pé pères* who were my special aides in the huge reception hut where the men were brought in on their stretchers from the field dressing stations and laid on the floor. Often during a battle there would be as many as eight hundred men, lying side by side in long rows under the peaked roof of that shed. It was the business of the old ones to undress them and wrap them in blankets and put hot-water bottles at their feet and sides, while I went quickly from one to another with my needles giving injections of camphor oil, or caffeine, or morphia. Gentle, very gentle were my old ones when they lifted a shattered limb or cut away the bloodstained coat from a bleeding side. Their gnarled peasants' hands are beautiful to me and their grizzled heads have majesty. I look again down the dreadful place under the flickering light of our hurricane lanterns. It is one in the morning. The door at the far end is still opening and shutting, opening and shutting—for still they are coming from the battlefield—and my old ones are going quietly and steadily about their business. I can see them from behind the wooden screen where I have a dozen fine needles on the boil. I have been on duty thirty-six hours and am become a sleepwalker, an automaton, and then one of my old ones puts his head round the screen and holds out both his old hands, one with a tin cup of *pinard*, the other with a hunk of bread. He has brought me his *casse-croûte* and he says in his rough voice, "*Faut manger, ma soeur.*"

I did not count the number who died as I knelt beside their stretchers. Great strong broken men who apologized in whispers for the trouble they gave in dying; slender boys whom I held in my arms while they cried for their mothers and who mistook me for some anxious woman I would never see; old patient humble men, as old as my old ones, who went quietly, so modestly; the French *poilus* of 1914-1918. I see them still, marching up the long roads of France in their clumsy boots and their heavy gray-blue coats that were too big for them; dogged, patient, steady men, plodding to death in defense of their land. I shall never forget them. Nothing in this new war has dimmed their memory nor crowded them out of the pantheon of the glorious dead.

All this and much more came back to me that radiant terrible Sunday morning in London. I must go back to those old ones, I whispered, take up

again the work that was interrupted. But how could I hope to do any such thing? I was too old. I had been involved in an accident called the Wall Street crash, I could no longer afford to equip a hospital out of my own pocket. An A.R.P. garage in Fulham was my battle station.

And what of my husband? He had resigned from the Army in 1921 and was now in Parliament. Would his service in the last war be remembered? Would the Prime Minister send for him? It didn't seem likely. Wally Robertson, C.I.G.S., in 1918 had sent him to Paris as head of the British military mission to the French government; he had held the post until the end of the Peace Conference, and Winston Churchill, who was a friend, had made full use of his exceptional knowledge of France when he became Secretary for War in 1919. But Churchill wasn't at the head of a government department now. There had been a thing called Munich, a stupid, shameful, criminal thing, a thing that was supposed to avert war and give us peace in our time. And now we were at war and Lord Halifax was Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Hore Belisha was at the War Office, and Sir John Simon was somewhere else, and B. had cooked his goose with the lot of them because he had said what he thought about Munich in no uncertain terms. No. It was not likely that Neville Chamberlain would make use of him. He and I must be content this time to stay at home.

And so I took myself off to my A.R.P. garage and the blackout began.

But sitting behind the sandbags in West Fulham waiting for the bombers that didn't come—I would think of France—of France at war and of Paris when the war ended.

How lucky we had been, B. and I, in those old days. Circumstance had set us at the center of the world at a moment when the world suddenly was set free. The Paris scene of the Peace Conference came back with the rush and sweep and splendid color of a sumptuous ballet. Driving myself home from Fulham at midnight through the blackout, I would stumble into the dimly lit London study to find Voltaire smiling with terrifying serenity, and behind his delicate plaster head I would watch, as I sipped my cup of Bovril, a procession of shadows passing up a distant abandoned staircase in Paris.

Lloyd George and Maynard Keynes and Robert Cecil; Venizelos and Beneš, Colonel and Mrs. House, Phillipe Berthelot and Georges Mandel. Colonel Lawrence accompanying Feisal, Paul Valéry, Anna de Noailles, Jean Cocteau and Marie Laurencin, Henri Bernstein and Simone. What a varied, colorful pageant it had been.

Our funny little house had been thronged, not only with soldiers and statesmen, artists and writers, but with the fastidious ladies of quality who

as a rule were intolerant of strangers. For the French Army had adopted Spears as a brother-in-arms and Paris had followed suit and opened its doors; a Paris that was as brilliant as a costly jewel, as gay as a happy carefree child.

Did I realize then in those days how lucky I was? I think so. I think I knew that the days whirling by would remain as the happiest days of my life. For I remember waking at night and listening to a sound that seemed to come out of heaven. It was the chant of the good nuns in a convent of our quarter rising soft and full above the rooftops. And I would be aware as I listened of a heartbreaking sweetness.

• III

B. and I would talk of those days and of the years that came after, during the lonely evenings of the autumn of '39. We would sit together, imprisoned by the blackout, and discuss the series of blunders, French and British, that had led the two countries through a so-called peace, to this.

The Peace Conference had not been the end for him of his work with and for the French, it had been the beginning. Indeed he had thrown himself with such fire and ardor into championing the cause of France that he had become known among the anti-French bloc in the House of Commons as the member for Paris. Then in '35 things had begun to go wrong. The atmosphere changed. And though B. stuck to his guns, went on doggedly working in and out of Parliament to further Anglo-French relations, his efforts had not satisfied the French politicians who succeeded each other in office with such bewildering rapidity. They would turn up in London, knock at our door and make it their business to explain the causes of friction between our two countries. Their complaint was that Great Britain having won the war had promptly "carted" her ally France, forgiven her enemy Germany, and was determined to build up a democratic German state in order to trade with her. France knew, they insisted, that this attitude would be fatal. She wanted security and believed not at all in a peaceful democratic German state. She was a realist. The sentimental complacency of the British exasperated her. Our incessant talk of peace, disarmament and the League of Nations drove our French friends to a frenzy.

All told the same story. Painlevé, Poincaré, Daladier, Flandin, Paul Reynaud, B. had kept in touch with them all. Flandin was one of the most outspoken. We saw him often, for he came often to England. He liked to shoot English pheasants and would stay with the Kemsleys and B. would collect a number of M.P.'s to meet him at dinner in London after his week end. He did not mince matters at these dinners. I remember a night when he pushed

back his chair and hissed through clenched teeth. "Very well, if you refuse to build up your armaments France must come to an understanding with Germany."

B. had formed an Inter Parliamentary Committee of French Deputies and British M.P.'s with Flandin as his opposite number. The British members were entertained in Paris and vice versa. B. and Flandin continued working together until at the time of Munich the Frenchman sent his famous telegram of congratulation to Hitler. It was the end of their association. We had not seen him since.

But things had gone wrong long before that. From 1935 on, any kindness shown to a French Minister, in London, landed B. in hot water with that Minister's enemies in Paris. If we received deputies of the right like Georges Mandel, those of the left cold-shouldered us. If we received men of the left those of the right were scathingly rude. Finally some of the friends we were most fond of refused to have anything more to do with us because B. had attended a dinner given for Blum in the House of Commons.

We seem to have been very naïve about all this but it was, I think, impossible for a member of the tolerant British Parliament to assess at their true strength the violent passions that were tearing France apart in 1937-1938. We had been in Paris during the February riots of '36 and had sensed the dangerous tension in the capital when Colonel de la Rocque's *Croix de Feu* clashed with the Communists, but we failed like most Britishers to estimate properly the disastrous moral effect on the propertied classes of the *Front Populaire* with its stay in strikes, its forty-hour week and its *congés payés*. Nor could we have imagined the lengths to which the Daladier government would go in order to avoid a Communist revolution.

The truth is that my husband loved France too well to acknowledge what was happening to her or believe that she had exchanged her old fear of Germany for the new prefabricated fear of the Communist bogey.

It didn't occur to us seriously that the French middle class might have made up its mind after the Blum regime to accept my compromise with Hitler rather than run the risk of a revolution of the left. Munich had done nothing to enlighten us in London. How could it when our own government was as ready as the French to sell out Czechoslovakia? We were amongst those in England who knew that, in spite of that futile betrayal a point would be reached when appeasement must stop. Daladier's government was weak, so was our own. We took for granted that both were aware that war was inevitable.

We should have known. The writing on the wall was clear enough for those who wished to read. Wishful thinking made us blind. B. and I paid

what was to be our last visit to Paris before the war during the summer of '39 expecting to be welcomed as comrades about to share in a perilous enterprise. Our reception by old friends was distinctly chilly. The explanation offered came as a shock. "It is because you are dragging us into your horrible war."

Well—all that was over—the long chapter of blunders and misunderstandings was finished. France was with us again—we were once more united in war. Nothing else mattered.

But was I to sit waiting for the duration in this A.R.P. garage? Was B. with his unparalleled knowledge of France to be left at home?

One morning an old friend of the last war, Lady Hadfield, rang up and asked me to come to see her in Carlton House Terrace. I went, was shown up to her room and when she had kissed me heard her say:

"Robert has given me a sum of money for war work. I would like it to be for the French but I want to do something with you. What shall it be?"

I needed not one instant for reflection. "I would like to do what I did in the last war."

"A field hospital?"

"Yes."

"Very well, let's do it. How do we begin?"

I thought a moment.

"B. knows General Gamelin. I could write to him."

"Do, my dear."

It was as simple as that. I went home as I had once gone back to my billet in the Chapeau Rouge and wrote a letter to General Gamelin telling him that, through the great generosity of Sir Robert Hadfield, Lady Hadfield and I were prepared to equip and organize a mobile hospital of one hundred beds. And my letter began:

"Twenty five years ago I wrote to General Joffre—"



## CHAPTER II

### I

IT TOOK us three months to get ready. Not very long in which to assemble from two sides of the Channel a mobile field hospital complete with staff and transport; but I remember being in a fidget lest the war come to an end before we could get to the front.

I find the following notes in my diary:

September 30th '39. The *Grand Quartier Général* has accepted in principle our offer of a hospital. General LeLong, head of the French Military Mission in London came into the Carlton yesterday with a party of French officers and stopped at our table to tell me the good news. Now that I am actually faced with the undertaking I feel dismay as well as elation. Lady Hadfield is as pleased as a child with a wonderful Xmas stocking but says she is too old to take an active part and that I am to do it all. She has opened a hospital account at Barclay's Bank, paid in Robert's handsome check and given me the checkbook.

She insists that the unit be called by both our names. So Hadfield-Spears it is to be. She wants to go to Paris next week but LeLong says we must wait until the *Grand Quartier Général* has studied the question of *modalités* and can put me in touch with the proper authorities.

October 8th. Hitler's speech to the Reichstag the event of the week. I cannot believe the government will wobble over his peace proposals. Winston in the Cabinet seems to be a guarantee against that.

De Kerilis has arrived from Paris. He told B. the morale of the French Army was good, that of the people behind the lines not so good. Ten million civilians have been evacuated at a moment's notice from eastern France leaving horses, cattle etc. in the fields. De Kerelis says the Siegfried Line is better than the Maginot Line because deeper; but neither army can hope to break through; so with five million men on either side there seems to be no way of their getting to grips unless the Germans invade Belgium.

Gamelin has written B. saying that he has handed on my letter to his

chief of staff and is certain our hospital will be of the greatest service, so I presume all is well.

When I asked B. what Gamelin was like, he shrugged his shoulders. Georges is his favorite. But I fancy he wonders how the present vintage compares with that of 1914-1918. Save for Georges and Pétain there seems to be no one of the first order. B. never trusted Weygand; says he was born an old man.

The little chap at the French consulate was very touching when Lady H. explained in her halting French why she was asking for a permit to go to Paris. Her gift was, she told him, the repayment of a debt she owed France for the happiest years of her life. Harassed and exhausted, his eyes filled with tears. How gentle and sensitive these Frenchmen are. Such beautiful manners. Do I like having my hand kissed? Yes. I do. Yet I wonder—General Georges is of course a different type altogether, square, solid, with a fine frank face. I wonder if he remembers taking B. and me to the Ruhr in 1919.

Have asked Maureen Schreiber to come with me as second in command.

It was with some trepidation that I boarded the Paris train with Lady Hadfield the middle of October. Now that our project was launched, doubts assailed me of my ability to carry it through. I had undertaken to create a hospital out of nothing. I had nothing to build on save a sum of money and a bit of experience a quarter of a century out of date. To whom could I look for help and wise counsel? Lady Hadfield agreed to everything I suggested and tossed back every question or doubt that I put to her with the airy observation that she was certain I would manage beautifully.

That was all very well. How was I to find my way about the *Service de Santé* after all these years? No one with whom I had had to do in the last war would be there. Must I have a pass to get into the *Ministère de la Guerre*? What sort of a pass? Where did I get it? I couldn't remember. I was mad, I said to myself, in the train, to think I could pull this thing off; it was sheer madness; and then suddenly, on arriving at the Gare du Nord to find the station thronged with French soldiery and the ladies of the French Red Cross busy behind their counters, it all came back to me, and I became once again what I had been, a woman in French uniform, a familiar of ministries, acquainted with all the habits and whims, the delays and red tape of the *Service de Santé*. And it seemed to me next day as I rattled down the Boulevard St. Germain in a taxi that the clock had been put back as if by magic twenty-five years. Nothing had happened during the interval; there had been no interval. This was the same war and I was

the same person carrying on with my hospital. I was making for the *Service de Santé* to interview someone about its affairs as I always had to do when I came down from the front. I would be told this time that we were to move as we had moved so often before. A great battle had been fought to a standstill. We were to be sent to some other part of the line. What more natural? Where would it be? Champagne? The Ardennes? Verdun? No. The Médecin Colonel Arèn facing me across his untidy desk said Le Colonel Liegois, *aide major général* at the *grand quartier*, was sending us to the IVth Army, to a village in Lorraine called St. Jean le Bassel, east of Nancy. There was a convent in St. Jean. A part of it had been requisitioned and would be handed over to us.

The window behind the courteous colonel reflected my gray army cape. There I sat as I always sat when I came down from Flanders, the Somme or the Chemin des Dames. The past twenty-five years were a dream. France hadn't changed, nor the *Service de Santé*. All those yellow forms, the long dirty pens that spluttered and scratched, the grimy corridors, nothing was different. What matter if Foch were dead and Fayolle and Clemenceau? There would be a new Tiger. Pétain was still alive. A host of younger men schooled in the old traditions had been pouring out of St. Cyr ever since 1918. The French Army was still the finest army in the world and I was a proud woman to be as of old in its service.

Colonel Arèn nodded as he glanced through the copies of my letters to the commander in chief. But yes, he was *au courant*—it was understood. He was to supply the *personnel masculin*, I was to bring my English nurses. He had received orders that everything was to be done to facilitate my task. One of his aides, by name Captain Lesaunier, had been told to hold himself at my disposal. He would send for him.

The colonel touched a bell. A *planton* was dispatched to fetch Captain Lesaunier.

The French Army, Colonel Arèn went on, was infinitely touched by the generosity of Sir Robert and Lady Hadfield. The *Service de Santé* had not forgotten my services during the last war. Nor those of my husband.

Yes, my husband still knew a number of officers.

The colonel smiled. "Your husband can claim the whole French Army as his friends, *Madame la Générale*."

Captain Lesaunier appeared somewhat breathless with a file under his arm. He was young and rosy with surprised baby-blue eyes. Colonel Arèn presented him. "You are to help *Madame la Générale* Spears. Do everything that she asks. If you get into difficulties come to me."

He bowed me out. Captain Lesaunier conducted me through the

labyrinth of dingy corridors and down the stairs. We arranged to meet next day. A *planton* would be waiting at ten o'clock to conduct me to his office.

I hurried back to our hotel and burst in on Lady Hadfield with the good news. We could set to work at once. The people at the *Service de Santé* had received orders to help us in every possible way. Colonel Arèn would pay her his respects at any time convenient to herself. He wanted to thank her personally for her great generosity. Such a charming man. He had said such nice things about B. A dear little captain with forget-me-not eyes in a round pink face was told off to help me. Everything was perfect. We were going to Lorraine, to a village called St. Jean le Bassel, behind the Maginot Line. I was to see Captain Lesaunier tomorrow. We had best get our surgical instruments and the big trucks in Paris—Renault and Citroën were the people. I stopped for breath. She hugged me; I hugged her; we hugged ourselves. How wonderful it was!

## II

I cannot remember what happened next. I have the most confused recollection of how I set to work. I think that first visit to Paris was short—that I was back in London ten days later. I know that Lady Hadfield stayed on in Paris for a bit, then left for her villa in the south of France and that I made repeated trips back and forth across the Channel haunting the *Ministère de la Guerre* and the War Office in turn, collecting our staff, our officers, our five-ton Renault trucks (at a fabulous price), tents, X-ray, sterilizing apparatus and surgical instruments in Paris; nurses, drivers, staff cars, beds, bedding, linen and ward equipment in London. Lady Hadfield had offered her London dining room as an office, her basement as a warehouse, and Providence had sent us an angel to run the London end in the large, handsome, placid shape of Dorothy Van Tets. Providence, indeed, took an active hand in our affairs from the outset. Nurses appeared like magic in answer to our appeal. Dorothy would see them first, then if they were keen enough to want to come for the small salary we offered, I would wade in to tell them about the discomforts and dangers they might be called upon to put up with. I made the salary small and painted the picture black deliberately. Experience proved my instinct right. Of the ten nurses finally selected not one let the unit down during the frightening and exhausting ordeal that awaited us. Nor do I believe there was a hospital overseas, British or French, where the standard of nursing was higher.

Lavinia Annaly was a second instrument of Providence. We had been

in the A.R.P. garage together in Fulham and when she knew of my plans, took me to Mrs. Cook, then commandant of the M.T.C.

"Mam," she said, "I've brought Mrs. Spears to see you. She wants twenty-five first-class drivers and fifteen cars to go overseas with her field hospital." Then after a minute's pause, with a ravishing smile—"Do you think you could help her?" And Mrs. Cook rose to it like a bird. The M.T.C. was a small affair in those days, but the war was young and London swarmed with valiant young women, eager to go to the war and ready to provide their own vehicles. A wonderful lot they were, those vehicles, Ford station wagons, a handsome Buick, two Sunbeams, two Dodge vans and an old Bedford shooting brake with benches that would carry thirty men. It was to be the clown of our convoy. A motley collection; I fear it lacked elegance, but the *personnel féminin* (nurses in gray, drivers in khaki) were a very smart lot. Some were pretty and some were plain, some were thin and others were fat, but all were young and splendidly alive.

I remember very well the day that I called them together for the last time in London. I was going on ahead to Paris with Maureen, they were to follow in a fortnight. As I looked at the circle of expectant faces, I had another of my moments of doubt and dismay. What was I doing? What did I mean by daring to assume responsibility for taking these girls overseas? How had it all come about? Impossible to tell what lay in store for us. Impossible to say how this one or that would behave in an emergency. Could I even be certain that I myself would not lose my head in a crisis? No. I couldn't. Well—I had started something. No turning back now if I wanted to. The moment passed. I didn't really believe in the dangers of which I had warned them and I did believe in my team. We hadn't tried each other out as yet, but they filled me with confidence. They were fine upstanding young women who had been drawn together by a spirit of adventure and a will to serve.

Maureen and I left finally the beginning of January. Audrey Pleydel-Bouverie had lent us her flat in Paris on the Quai Malaquai and it was there on a bitterly cold day that Jean Gosset presented himself. Le Médecin Capitaine Gosset, *le médecin chef* designate of our unit. He had come down from the Ardennes and wore a leather jacket lined with sheepskin and riding boots. He was very tall. He had a long, queer, passionate face, pale sullen eyes and beautiful hands. He talked very fast in excellent English and began at once to ask questions about our equipment. Had I the list by me of our surgical instruments? No. Captain Lesaunier had the list. When would I go with him to see the captain? Tomorrow. Good. Would I come with him now to inspect the X-ray trailer? There were things that

must be done to it. A disreputable two-seater Hotchkiss was at the door. Gosset climbed behind the wheel and rushed me out to the depot of the *Service de Santé* outside the Porte de Chatillon where our material was being assembled. I find the name in my little Paris address book of those days preceded by cryptic initials—E.C.O.A.T. *Service de Santé*, Fort de Vanves, and underneath *Sergeant Chef Duhazi, service modèle type*. Sergeant Chef Duhazi springs from the grubby little page. A swarthy, wiry, alert creature who could adapt a model type to the requirements of any fanatical X-ray specialist, he became my guide, counselor and friend, leading me quickly down the alleyways of the immense sheds where a million surgical instruments were being sorted and packed into baskets, offering me his lean muscular arm across the frozen slippery yard to other distant sheds where our handsome trucks waited for their loads. For Gosset and I together haunted the bleak premises of the Fort de Vanves as I had haunted the dim little office of good patient Captain Lesaunier in the *Ministère de la Guerre*.

Poor Lesaunier. What a patient faithful soul he was. I used to climb his dingy stairs every other day. Always I found him telephoning, fruitlessly, behind mountainous files, to distant depots in the provinces for urgently, desperately needed supplies. He would motion me to a chair, sweeping a pile of papers on to the floor to give me room to sit down, while he clung to his instrument, imploring, cajoling and at last mildly threatening some colleague at the other end of the line, gazing at me the while, out of his unseeing harassed blue eyes. But when at last he put down the receiver, a smile would light up his round fair face and he would give himself to my business as if the little matter of collecting an X-ray trailer from one province of France, the screen to go inside it from another, by means of goods trains that took anything from two weeks to a month to do a couple of hundred miles, were the task above all else that warmed his heart and brightened the squalid routine of his office. I wonder what has become of him? Once our equipment was assembled at the Fort de Vanves, I no longer had any reason to go to him for help and he dropped out of my life.

Gosset I continued to see every day. He would turn up at the Quai Malaquai and drive me with savage determination and a great grinding of brakes from one government office or military depot or warehouse to another. Some are there in my little worn book:

*"Essence, Commandant Marjorelle, état-major 4ième Bureau 1000 litres."*

The reference is clear enough. We touched the good commandant of whom I have no recollection for a thousand liters of petrol but I am vague as to what I was doing in the office of Le Capitaine Cizi-Costan, com-



merce extérieur of the Ministère de l'Armement. I think I was asking him for permission to purchase those five-ton Renault trucks. But perhaps I had gone about the rolling kitchen that looked like a clumsy gun carriage and was to play such an important part in our lives, for *Cuisine Roulante, Maison D'Orval, 2 Place de la Borde* appears immediately beneath the accommodating Capitaine Cizi.

It is difficult to recall one's first impression of a man whom one comes to know in very trying circumstances but I remember that I was very favorably impressed by Jean Gosset. He was an intellectual and a man of the world. He had excellent if slightly flamboyant manners and could exert a very effective charm. I learned later that he knew this and made good use of it. If he wanted something from someone he would say, "*Je vais faire du charme pendant une demi-heure!*" I daresay he was turning his charm on me with his usual cynicism, during those days. Why not? We were partners. It was up to him to get on with me. The easiest way to do so was to charm me; he did.

It was evident that he had a gift for organization and I was told that he was an even more brilliant surgeon than his very fashionable father. Professor Gosset was a polished old worldling with a large house in the Champs de Mars and a very lucrative clientele. He spoke softly and he looked flabby. He invited me with some condescension to assist at one of his operations at Sal Pêtrière and I did, to my discomfort. I can endure any amount of war surgery, but I do not like seeing immense tumors removed from shrunken old women, even when the performance is gone through with smooth perfection, with a minimum of effort and in absolute silence. Professor Gosset operated beautifully, softly, exquisitely. He had stepped softly up to his position of pre-eminence among the surgeons of Paris and he kept that pre-eminence contentedly, so we were told, under the German occupation, collaborating no doubt with his habitual air of beautiful condescension until he died. I was not surprised when I heard that he had adapted himself so comfortably to the Nazis. I had disliked and distrusted him at once. It was quite otherwise with his son.

### III

It is strange to look back and observe how little I understood during those days of what was going on in Paris behind the façade of military activity. Why, I ask myself, had I no inkling of what was about to happen, no suspicion of the fate that was awaiting the French Army? I was given the hint again and again. I heard the whispering. Whispers that all was

not well at the *Ministère de l'Air*, that the quays at Le Havre were strewn with crated American planes—never uncrated because the necessary palms hadn't been properly greased—whispers that Gamelin spent his time in Paris intriguing against Georges—whispers of peace—incessant whispers of peace.

I smiled at such stuff and went on with my own business.

Bonnet they said in the salons of the polite world—he was the man. He would soon oust Daladier and start *pour-parlers* with the Germans. Of what use to prolong this phony war? Neither army could get at the other. The Germans knew it as well as we did. They were realists like the French. If only the British could be persuaded—the time was ripe for peace.

The reiterated word did begin after a time to irritate me. "Peace," they murmured over little tables at Larue's, or Maxim's, or Ciro's. Peace—the whispers rose to loud chatter at cocktail parties.

How witty they were, these smart folk of Paris who crowded the Ritz bar. Smug diplomats, languid beauties. I had been enthralled in the old days by these ladies, fascinated by the miracle of their grace, their fragile ageless bones and inexhaustible temperament. But now there was something wrong, their light laughter struck a discordant note. What had their elegant furbelows and exquisite pointed fingernails to do with war?

But the war hadn't begun. It had been going on for three months to be sure but there had been no battle. Perhaps there would be none.

"*Vous croyez vraiment,*" they said to me when I appeared in uniform, "*que cela vaut la peine, cette guerre?*"

It was all there for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. The defeatism, the corruption, the treachery that had been eating away the foundation of France and was to bring about the collapse of her armies. I said to myself: "These people don't count. They represent nothing. France hasn't changed since 1914"—and I would hurry for comfort to the woman whom I trusted above all others, who was, and is, one of the most brilliant French women of her time.

She was grim during those days. She saw, I believe, what was coming and didn't flinch, she had a fearless mind, but she would ask about England, her eyes doubtful and dark with distress. Was it true that we had been caught unprepared? When would we be able to put a great army into the field? Did Chamberlain have his heart in the war? I could not give her the answers she longed to hear.

I have seen her again. And I shall tell of how I found her when the iron curtain was lifted. We have talked together since the liberation of France almost as we used to talk—almost but not quite. We had had in common a

great liking for truth and an immense zest for life, could disagree with enjoyable violence respecting each other's passionate prejudices and we never lied to each other. Nor did we lie when we met again after the four years' silence, but there were questions I dared not put, fearing she would not tell me the truth, or if she did, that I would be unable to bear it. Something enormous, you understand, happened to divide us, something that we cannot talk about without fear or prevarication. I haven't lost her. It is still possible for us to enjoy being together, but it will never be quite the same. So she must remain nameless.

And the others whom I loved, they too must be nameless, for they are gone. They seemed to me in '39 to be as close to us as they had been in 1918. They were full of interest and sympathy with my project. They said how gallant it was of these English girls to go to the front to nurse their wounded. Then they would shudder or change the subject. I should have known what that meant, should have realized. But how could I? They were a part of the best years of my life, belonged to the time when I was young and in love and lived on the left bank of the Seine. We had won a world war together then and our hearts were light because they had been brave. How could I doubt these old friends now? Why should I? They were the same people. I thought them unchanged.

I was wrong. They were graceful and kind. They expressed admiration but were not really interested in my venture. They didn't want to be interested. They were giving their sons to the army, but unwillingly. They hated the war, but not as we hated it, for they did not admit that it was inevitable, and they wished to have as little to do with it as possible.

I remember sitting after luncheon with a group of these friends, shortly before I left for Lorraine. I remember the sunlit room, the wood fire in the grate, the delicious aroma of the coffee in my cup, and the plaintive charm of my hostess. I admired her quality more than that of almost any woman I had ever met. Frail, very slender, with a mocking tenderness in her voice, she had always charmed me. Now she said, "How can you do it, May?"

"I did it before."

"But that was different, *chère amie*."

"You mean the war was different?"

"But of course."

"I don't understand."

She gave an impatient shrug, then laughed, a gentle mocking apologetic laugh.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that all I want is peace—peace at any price."

I didn't believe her. It didn't occur to me to take her seriously as meaning literally what she said.

Now I am afraid to ask what became of that charming group when the monstrous thing happened. Because they were friends, I cannot pry into their secrets. Perhaps it is even true that I never knew them.

But we used to be intimate, that is the queer thing. It used to seem almost as if we belonged to the same race. Now we are strangers.

It may be that I shall meet them again in the streets of Paris or London; if I do, if they speak and smile at me, it will not alter the fact that I have lost them.

Dorothy Van Tets meanwhile had been filling the basement of Carlton House Terrace with blankets, and sheets and towels, hot-water bottles and pajamas, jugs and basins and mugs and plates, surgical trays and bedpans, every possible thing in fact that a surgical unit required, and all was ready to be shipped to Paris. Infinitely tactful and always unruffled, she had taken her placid way through the warehouses of the City of London and the offices of Whitehall and lo and behold all the City and most of Whitehall had become her charmed collaborators.

I do not know how she shipped those crates and bales to Paris. I've no idea how she managed to get the nurses complete with passports, exit permits and luggage across the Channel. The M.T.C. unit took themselves across in batches with their vehicles and drove them to Paris, the nurses came by train; and I found when I went to meet them one wintry night at the Gare du Nord that the journey had not been without incident. Battered by the Channel waves, hungry, exhausted, disheveled, and hung about with an incredible assortment of string bags and paper parcels but laughing at their misery they came staggering down the platform. We piled them into the two Fords that were waiting and took them to join the M.T.C. unit at the Hotel Moderne in the Place de la Bastille amid groans and laughter. The note of the Hadfield-Spears Unit had been struck at its very beginning; it was a note of ribald mirth that rose in a crescendo exactly proportioned to the discomfort or tension of a given moment.

Colonel Arèn had generously fulfilled his part of the bargain. Three young surgeons had been attached to the unit in addition to Gosset. Lieutenants Boutron, Huguet and Guénin; one medical man, Dr. Bernard, an X-ray specialist, Le Canouet, and the usual administrative staff. Fifty *soldats de IIIème classe* were waiting in barracks near the Fort de Vanves to join up. The twelve military drivers who would drive the heavy trucks were under the orders of a *sergeant chef* selected by Gosset himself. We had been given a

military number and had become *Ambulance Chirurgicale Légère de Corps d'Armée* 282.

And so all the bits and pieces of our formation were gathered together. The beds and the mattresses and the pillows and Dorothy's beautiful soft blue blankets were loaded into the handsome French trucks.

Lady Hadfield came back from the south with a smart Renault limousine which she presented to me as my own personal car. B. came to spend my last week with me in Paris. Mrs. Cook came to attend the final inspection of the unit at the Fort de Vanves and on a bitter day early in February our convoy waved a gay good-by to Paris and took the road to Lorraine.

## CHAPTER III

### I

IN SPITE of the ice on the roads, we did the two hundred and fifty miles without mishap and made Nancy by five o'clock. General Réquin, commander of the IVth French Army, had sent his A.D.C., Captain Lecomte, to meet us at the Hotel Thiers with his compliments, inviting Lady Hadfield, myself and all the officers of the unit, masculine and feminine, French and British, to lunch with him next day at his headquarters. It was on the way to St. Jean le Bassel, Captain Lecomte explained; we could reach the convent easily after lunch. *En attendant* he had reserved rooms for Lady Hadfield and me at the hotel and had billeted *ces dames* as best he could in the town. I would understand. There were many troops garrisoned in Nancy. He hoped the young ladies would be indulgent.

The twenty-five young ladies were prepared to be. All they asked for the moment was a shelter where they could thaw out their swollen hands and remove frozen boots. Standing in the snow that shone faintly through the gathering dark I presented the young officer and to each he bowed formally from his slender waist, a little smile of amused admiration curving his sensitive lips. A tall, fine-drawn young man, very chic in the close-fitting black tunic of the *Chasseurs à Pied*, I think of him with pleasure and gratitude. During the coming months—and I was to see him in trying and tragic circumstances—his exquisite courtesy never failed him. Whatever the occasion he was always elegantly turned out and perfectly calm and completely adequate. We have laughed since at the memory of that winter evening in Nancy when we went together through the cold, dim, empty streets to one shuttered house after another to bed the girls down for the night.

Nancy! silent city of ghosts and splendid memories; the Place Stanislas dreamed under a coldly glittering sky, the snowy streets were deserted, not a chink of light filtered through the pale sedate rows of mysterious shutters. The girls of 282 shattered the silence and dispelled the ghosts as they spilled out of their motors. The "Nannies" as the drivers called them, proved to have brought with them an extraordinary assortment of curiously shaped



bundles and to have been eating all day out of paper bags. A certain dissimilarity between the girls in khaki and those in gray became evident; arguing began between the figures in gray on the pavement and those in khaki astride the luggage racks on the roofs of the cars as to what must come down. Evelyn in gray must have her hold-all, Alexandra wanted her large kit bag. Maria's bass voice boomed through the gloom from the top of her Ford, Elaine Bodley kept crying, "Please will somebody help me—Oh please, it is much too heavy." A frail member of the M.T.C. was our Boddles. T. W. cursed beneath her breath as she flung bundles of bedding into Lecomte's exquisite arms. Our first night on the road was a foretaste of what I was to expect. But the ten nurses and fifteen drivers were housed at last! *Tant bien que mal*. T. W. in an attic up a flight of outside stairs, steep as a ladder. I left her with a streaming cold under a dingy quilt. Boddles was to sleep in a bath. And an hour later with their hilarious noses in large jugs of beer, half the unit had forgotten their aches and pains in the cosy warmth of the Hotel Thiers's café bar.

It is impossible in this narrative to give pen portraits of all these girls. Of the twenty-five who went to Lorraine in '40, seven started out again with our new unit for the Middle East a year later. It was inevitable that I should come to know some better than others.

Dorca Stanhope dominates the lot. She became and has remained my great ally, counselor and friend. Since she couldn't come with us to the Middle East she took on the ungrateful task, when we left England again, of looking after the affairs of the unit in London. I cannot overstate the debt I owe to her fine intelligence, her unwavering loyalty, her magnificent detachment. Everything about her is big. Big physically, big mentally and big hearted, she looked down on our little world of petty jealousies and mean ambitions with a penetrating gaze that missed nothing and dismissed much of it with a snort of good-humored derision.

She and Maria soon joined forces. Being much of a size they nicknamed themselves Mr. and Mrs. Rubens. Maria has a rough and ready sense of humor and was much given to nicknames. Elaine Bodley, the gay, the inconsequent, the comically sophisticated, became Boddles to us all, poor fat sister Alexandra Forbes became the Strawberry Queen because of her predilection for uniforms of strawberry pink, I was "*Madame la Générale*" pronounced with an execrable American accent. For Maria is an American by birth and I suspect that twenty-odd years of life in England with a couple of English husbands has made her into the likeness of someone who does not in reality exist. Her rough tongue, her gruff voice and great pounding stride belie the innocence of her eyes and her ability to blush.

Barbara Graham was very nearly as important to me as Dorea, but it took me longer to know her, perhaps because I could never hear what she was saying. When she drove me, as she often did, she would keep up a steady flow of mumbling and chuckling, but for all I got out of it she might have been talking to herself. A curiously attractive creature with a careless disregard for her looks and only a spasmodic craving for soap and hot water, a bit of a gypsy, a bit of an explorer, a bit of a genius, no one could improvise in a crisis like Barbara or smear herself as beautifully with axle grease. She and Kit Tatham-Warter, who had turned from horses to motors at the outbreak of hostilities and talked of her mechanized vehicles as if they had all the tricks and habits of quadrupeds, were outstanding as drivers and mechanics. I could never decide which was the better of the two. Barbara drove with apparently careless ease, Kit, or T. W. as we called her, like a man—powerful, tireless and taciturn. I close my eyes and see her strong shoulders and steady head beyond the windscreen and know that whatever the state of the roads I needn't worry. I never did. Across trackless deserts, wadies deep in sand, snowbound mountain passes or unbridged torrents, these two drove their rattling, shuddering, heavy and obstreperous vehicles, undefeated and undefeatable. We shall hear more of them as we cross the Sinai and Western deserts. Of Cynthia too, whom I had first met in her Paris cradle in 1919, and Rosaleen Forbes, who joined us just in time to drive me during our nerve-racking flight across France. A couple of young thoroughbreds were Cynthia and Rosaleen—not yet twenty-one when they joined the unit—both darlings of the gods of a pleasant godless world, high-strung and not too strong physically, they had serenely and gaily defied their parents, waved good-by to their disgruntled admirers and were come determined to prove that they were tough.

But I musn't linger over these girls whom I grew to know better perhaps than I know anyone in the world. I must jump back to Nancy and IVth Army Headquarters, hurry through our pleasant lunch with General Réquin and get on to the great snowbound convent that was to house the hospital for three months.

General Réquin had always been an admirer of Great Britain. He and my husband had been comrades in arms in the last war and had not altogether lost touch with each other during the years between. Indeed it was, I believe, because of his warm feelings toward my country that our unit had been attached to his army. Not every French Army commander would have welcomed a group of English women with equal cordiality. His welcome, I knew, was genuine. He was B.'s friend, he now became mine. He has remained so. For in his case, there has been no diffi-

culty in bridging the gulf of a four-year separation. There has in fact been no gulf. Though he lived on in Paris during the German occupation, I knew that he never lowered his head, nor denied his friends. Dr. Goebbels' propaganda could not affect Réquin.

A strong man, short, sturdy, thickset, very fair-skinned, with silvery hair, a prominent nose and a pair of humorous blue eyes, he was weighty and quick, cordial and reserved, full of little jokes but deadly serious and combined the qualities of a gifted painter and a first-class commander of troops.

He expressed his gratitude to Lady Hadfield in a small staccato voice and welcomed the girls with the words, "You are the only British troops in my army and I intend to make the most of you."

He meant it. I found to my surprise that he really thought it important that his officers and men should see the English girls who had come to serve them. Often he said to me, "My people don't appreciate the effort Great Britain is making." Or, "We never see our British allies in this part of the front. My men keep asking me, 'Where are the English?'" "And he would invite two or three of the girls to go with him each week on tours of inspection of the Maginot Line, not so much for their sake as for that of his troops. No one could have been more considerate or more solicitous for our welfare. During all the weeks that we remained under his command I felt his presence in the background supporting me and knew that I could count on him in emergency. On his side he gave me his confidence. He proved this at that first meeting, for he took me aside after lunch and cautioned me. He had serious doubts he said of the loyalty of the civilian population in his sector. He counted on me to impress on my staff the danger of discussing in the village any aspect of the war, movement of troops, numbers of wounded, and so on. The same warning applied to the nuns in the convent. They were saintly women no doubt, but many spoke German only and he had been informed that a secret wireless was concealed in the vast cellars of the establishment. This might not be true. He was loath to order a search, for the situation was delicate, the village was devoutly Catholic and not at all friendly to the French troops who were billeted in its outhouses and barns. He must go cautiously, lest he rouse even greater hostility. He counted on "*ces dames*" to be tactful and circumspect.

I am sorry now that he talked to me that day as he did. Perhaps he was right. Had he not done so, we might have been indiscreet, who knows? As it was, his words created a prejudice in my mind against the nuns making it impossible for me to treat them as friends—and yet I believe they were friends. I shall never know whether his suspicions and my own were just.

It may be that the sisters were more German than French in sympathy. Or it may be that living as they did in a frontier zone occupied throughout history by the armies first of one nation then of the other, they had rid themselves of any partisan feeling and were solely concerned with the Kingdom of God.

## II

I do not pretend to understand the mind that remains aloof from such a desperate human struggle as war. There is a mystery about the saintly life that produces in me a faint nostalgic fear. Is it because I love the turbulent world too much? Am I afraid in the presence of a renunciation that I cannot make? Again I don't know. I only know that I am both fascinated and repelled by the atmosphere of a convent and that the serenity of a face framed by a nun's white coif makes me humble but rebellious.

At St. Jean le Bassel, the contrast between the quiet nuns and our noisy busy selves was very great. But I know now that those with whom we came in personal contact grew fond of us for I have been back to see them.

Indeed it is Sister Marie Jeanne with her worn tender face and heavenly eyes that I see when I think of St. Jean. And here is a strange thing. Overshadowing our busy, exciting hospital life with its fight against pain and death, towering above the movement of troops and the menace of battle, rises the convent. Looking back I see Marie Jeanne smiling gently when I ask if she is not afraid; listening, it is the convent bell calling to prayer, not the tramp of feet going up the road to the war, that I hear. And I am homesick for St. Jean le Bassel and the saintly women I refused to know.

The village though deep in snow was ugly the day we arrived. The little houses were mean and grubby behind their frozen mounds of manure and the convent forbidding. Lady Hadfield and I were received in a cold parlor by a bent little creature with a long withered face that seemed to me cold and secretive. Was it her voice or General Réquin's warning that chilled me? She spoke in French but with a strong German accent, apologizing for the *Mère Supérieure*, who was ill. She hoped in a hopeless whispered monotone that we would be content. She seemed very strange. She remained a stranger. It didn't occur to me that we must seem very strange to her, that she might be frightened by the two women who had just arrived all the way from England with a horde of stalwart young ladies in uniform. I was on my guard, even with the comic plump body who waddled before us to show us our quarters. I think that I was courteous. But my memory of that first encounter has been all confused by recent and quite different impres-

sions. I remember panting after Gosset up and down stairs, then finding myself floundering through the snow with Dr. Bernard and Dorea: the nurses were to be lodged with me in the convent but the M.T.C. were to be billeted in the village.

Lady Hadfield must have left us by that time. She was spending the night at Nancy then returning to Paris and her villa in the south. It was growing dark. The single village street led between walls of manure past the convent gate, round the convent wall, and straggled into a crooked square under the great towering convent barns. Dr. Bernard had a piece of paper with a list of the girls' billets. But how we got them all tucked away, more or less to their liking, I cannot tell. I know that Boddles was lodged with her face creams at Klein's, the baker's, opposite the convent gate, and Maria came to roost in a house at the corner of the square, while Dorea has confessed to me since that her landlady appeared to have kept the village brothel but that the visitors were very well behaved. But again, the little houses are all jumbled together in my memory. I see, as I look back, a conglomeration of large raftered rooms pervaded by livestock, of small stuffy rooms filled with great feather beds, of Hadfield-Spears motors snorting in front of the manure heaps and rosy faces grinning from windows under thatched roofs. For the M.T.C. girls made the village their own in no time. Taking the walls of manure by storm, they laughed and cajoled their way into the stubborn hearts of the grim housewives, invaded the gloomy kitchens, the stiff little parlors all hung with framed photographs of relatives in German uniform and shamelessly shared the open privies with cows, pigs, and members of the family.

One wing of the great convent building had been requisitioned by the *Service de Santé* at the beginning of the war and some two hundred nuns and novices had been evacuated to make room for the H.O.E. that we were replacing, but more than that number must have remained. I never knew how many. Silent figures with bent heads would flit past us in the long dim corridors. Were they always the same? How could one tell? My room was on the first floor near a great door that cut off our world from theirs. I would catch glimpses of whispering groups through the doorway. And I knew that *la Mère Supérieure* lay ill beyond, for Sister Marie Jeanne who looked after me and brought my coffee to my room each morning told me.

It was a narrow white room—whitewashed walls, a white iron bed with a white coverlet, white cambric curtains at the window that looked on the garden. Sister Marie Jeanne kept it spotless. She would bring me my morning coffee on a tray with a clean white cloth. The cup was of fine white porcelain

garlanded with tiny pink roses. It was, though I didn't know it at the time, my special cup and she guarded it jealously.

Dear Sister Marie Jeanne, why didn't I talk to you? Your presence was a benediction. You thought of me as a great benefactress, a good woman whose life was dedicated to works of mercy. Had I told you the truth, that I had come to the war out of egotism and a spirit of adventure, to enjoy myself, you wouldn't have believed me. Your heart and mind are too innocent to understand. I knew the other day when I went back to see you that you loved me—and I loved you, Marie Jeanne.

No. I cannot blame General Réquin for my attitude toward Sister Marie Jeanne and the Mother Superior who was dying not ten yards from my door. I knew the Mother was very ill. Though she seldom said more than a gentle good morning, Marie Jeanne would stop sometimes for a moment by my bed, her worn face very sad, and say, "*La Mère Supérieure va très mal*," or she would point toward the great door at the end of the corridor and say in an awed whisper, "She is still there"—then go gently away leaving me to drink my coffee and worry over the problems of the hospital and the immense uncanny lassitude of the war.

### III

The unit that moved off the day we arrived had used the ground floor only of the wing we took over and had left it in an unspeakably filthy condition. Most of the patients had been evacuated, only those who were too ill to be moved were left behind. But the empty wards were pigsties. A wireless was installed in the operating room; champagne bottles (empty) were stacked in the cupboards—and the plight of the patients who had been collected together in a great dark vaulted hall below ground was tragic. As I handed them over to my nurses, I was reminded of that nightmare casino in Malo-les-Bains.

Had French nurses learned nothing since 1914? Apparently not. But that was unfair, there had been no nurses in the casino at Malo-les-Bains until we came and there had been a retreat from Mons, a battle of the Marne and an epidemic of typhoid, while here there had been no retreat, no battle, no epidemic, only a phony war where a few men had got wounded, almost by accident. And though the wounds of these men were infected, their lips parched with fever, their backs gaping with bedsores deep enough to swallow a fist, their nurses had just tripped gaily away from the door.

Gosset was as shocked as I. He condemned the whole ground floor and

set about reorganizing in a fury. There was a series of large bright dormitories upstairs, already filled with the white beds of a hundred former pupils; these would make beautiful wards. He gave orders that they should be got ready. We had with us a portable operating room (*cellule opératoire*). Gosset put it inside one of the old wards, moved the sterilizing trailer to its back door and set carpenters and painters to work. Dr. Bernard cleared the operating room of its champagne bottles and turned it into a place of resuscitation. Barbara and Cynthia rushed into Sarrebourg and came back with twenty-five kilos of white paint and several rolls of American cloth, while Maureen with a team of helpers unpacked our nice English pillows, our new white sheets, Dorothy's lovely soft blankets and my last extravagant purchase in Paris, a hundred gay bedspreads, fifty pink and fifty blue.

It took us a fortnight to get the new wards into shape, but it was a great day when the stretcher bearers were summoned to move the patients upstairs. I watched their faces as they were carried into the bright clean rooms. The M.T.C. girls had done a good job. All the bedside tables were painted white and covered with American cloth—green and white check to go with pink bedspreads, blue and white with the blue—and the sisters were there in their crisp white caps and aprons, waiting to settle the poor creatures into their new clean beds.

Ravishing Jean with her heart-shaped face, handsome Evelyn with her bright-blue eyes and snow-white teeth, gentle MacManaway, trim Kelsey—I felt a choke in my throat as I saw the shock of surprise, then the dawning delight on those wasted faces and heard the gasping intake of incredulous breath. But what I remember most vividly of all was the twisting trembling mouth of the Strawberry Queen and what I hear now is her sudden stifled sob as she lifted a paralyzed skeleton of a man in her strong fat arms and placed him oh so gently on one of the air cushions Dorothy had sent from London.

I do not propose to discuss in this book the subjects of war surgery, hospital management or the technical side of nursing. I am not qualified to do so. But I know good nursing from bad. I have watched several hundred operations and can tell quickly enough if a surgeon is bungling his job. After all one can judge the work in a hospital as in a factory, by results. Our results were good. Not only did an exceptional proportion of our patients get well, they were happy, the hospital was a happy place. Not perhaps very orthodox. I had no matron, the nurses were responsible directly to me. I made very few rules and didn't pretend to a technical knowledge that I didn't possess, but the system worked. Our young French surgeons



who proved to be quite first-class and keen as mustard were pleased with their "*infirmières anglaises*" and the *infirmières* after some turning up of noses at French methods were pleased with their surgeons. Before long, some were very pleased indeed. Romance made its appearance. I had no objection. Indeed I was glad to find that quite soon each surgeon was proclaiming the sister in charge of his ward to be the best of the bunch. But what delighted me was the affection of our patients for their English nurses.

There was only one service in the hospital that gave any trouble. Peace did not reign in the operating room. Nancy Wright, our stalwart Australian who bore the title of surgeon's assistant in that commonwealth, was the operating sister, and as long as she was left in charge with Pip Scott-Ellis as her stooge all was well, but a tiny scared creature was introduced to it a fortnight after our arrival who nearly wrecked the place. Her name was Mademoiselle Radenac. She was a professional nurse and had worked with Gosset in the Ardennes; he had asked me to take her on and I, to my sorrow, had consented. Scared she might be, scared she certainly looked, but she was as obstinate as a mule. She had her way of doing things and nothing could change it and it was not the way of Australia. If Australia cleaned and powdered her rubber gloves in her fashion, France in the shrunken shape of Mademoiselle Radenac would creep in when Australia wasn't looking and undo what Australia had done. And explanations were difficult, for Australia spoke no word of French, France no word of English. Luckily Pip Scott-Ellis was bilingual, breezy and a stalwart buffer between them. Luckily for Australia. For Radenac, tiny and timid as she appeared, was more than a match for our magnificent towering Wright. I suspect her of calling on all the saints to help her. I believe that she knelt each night in her cotton nightdress by her bed, bowing her narrow shoulders, her high round forehead on her bony hands, while she prayed to be given strength to overcome the great slashing Australian. And she did overcome her, quite often. More than once I found Nancy Wright in tears and had to appeal to Gosset to put the devout little Radenac in her place as second to the sister-in-charge.

Evelyn Fuhlroth had taken on night duty and stuck to it for choice during the whole of our three months at St. Jean.

I would do the rounds each night before going to bed and if any very serious cases had come in during the day, I was sure to find the surgeon who had operated giving her his last instructions. I remember the long, darkened, quiet wards, the shadowy forms in the beds, the night light on the sister's desk shining softly on her bright eyes and white cap. No. 5

was very bad, she would tell me. Dr. Bernard had given him a blood transfusion. No. 7's temperature had gone down. No. 13 was naughty—he had torn off his dressing again. A voice near by spoke in a whisper: "*Ma soeur*"—That was 19—"J'ai mal, ma soeur. Ma jambe me fait mal." She moved away quickly. I stood by the bed as she arranged the fracture pillows, to ease the heavy plaster leg. What matter that she didn't understand much French when she knew the language of pain.

What difference did it make if these angels of efficient mercy squabbled among themselves, grumbled about their food, and complained that the M.T.C. girls had all the perks. Maureen would come to me nearly every day with tales of woe. So and so had nipped in and stolen someone's hot bath. A. had been rude to B. C. wanted to change her day off with D. and D. wouldn't. I remember once after a particularly unpleasant séance taking refuge in one of the wards. A tiny Zouave had come in, with five perforations of the intestine and acute peritonitis. Dr. Boutron had operated. An interesting case. It was the first time I had seen Septoplex powder poured into an inflamed abdomen and we were all on tiptoe believing the little chap would pull through, as he did. But he had a way of sliding down in his bed until he all but disappeared; and two of the nurses were lifting him up on his pillows that afternoon when I came in. One to either side, their arms linked under him, they lifted him between them, slowly, carefully, with such exquisite smooth certainty that I caught my breath as one does when suddenly ushered into the presence of a very beautiful work of art. I had wanted to knock their heads together that very morning. Now I felt almost like going down on my knees. I did nothing so incorrect. But that night, as on so many nights when I thought over the day in my silent white room, I was satisfied. Yes, the hospital was a good hospital, no patient would ever suffer under our roof from maltreatment or neglect. The authorities were pleased with us. General Wörms, *médecin inspecteur* of the IVth Army, would have been even more enthusiastic, I fancy, if he hadn't been so afraid of Gosset. Poor miserable little Wörms. Ineffective, fussy, he was full of good will and gratitude. But General Réquin remained our great friend and protector. I would take two or three of the girls to lunch with him at Vic. He would visit the wounded every week or so and stay to tea, bringing with him our special favorite, Captain Lecomte, and sometimes General de Lattre de Tassigny, one of the divisional commanders.

I wondered about De Lattre. An interesting character. Rather fascinating, but I wasn't sure that I liked him. His heavy good looks, his dramatic manners and his fanciful talk made up a personality almost too picturesque to be true. There was something extravagant about his flattery, something

excessive in his attentions, something exaggerated about his professed admiration for England and the English. While Réquin was small, compact, downright and dependable, De Lattre seemed to me large, fluid and unaccountable. Was he, as his friends declared, a magnificent commander of troops or as his enemies hinted an *intrigant* and a *lazybones* who spent his time collecting together for his own pleasure all the good musicians among the ranks of his division? Who was I, to criticize? General Réquin thought highly of him and I surely should be grateful for the evenings of really beautiful music spent at his divisional headquarters.

I am aware that none of this has the sound of war. The truth is that there was no war that could be called war in our sector—neither in February when we arrived, nor at any time up to the sixth of June when we left, suddenly, to be engulfed in the army's headlong retreat. There were wounded, just enough wounded to keep the surgeons and nurses occupied. Somewhere up there beyond the pillboxes and the flooded areas of the Maginot Line that failed so completely to resemble my imagined picture, since one could never tell where it was or if one were in it, French patrols were going out to meet German patrols and the French wounded were brought back to us. Six or eight one day, a dozen the next. But all around and above, the land and the sky were quiet—so quiet that I felt uneasy. General Réquin was uneasy too. He confessed to me that he was worried about the effect on his troops of the long inactivity. I was worried about the troops who had been in action and who came to us to be nursed. They were not like the *poilus* of 1914-1918. Oh not at all. That lot had been tough—*gros gaillards* who took their punishment as all in the day's work and cracked jokes on the operating table. These men compared to them were frail and soft, patient under pain, yes, but sensitive, with a look in their eyes that reminded one of the eyes of suffering children or gentle dumb animals, and some clung like children to the nurses, and others showed a pathetic, an excessive joy in the flowers we gathered to put in the wards. But that was in the spring when the lilacs in the nuns' garden and the apple trees in the orchard burst into bloom.

#### IV

And then one morning when Sister Marie Jeanne brought me my morning coffee, I saw that she was very sad. Her eyes were red with weeping and when I asked what troubled her, the tears brimmed over and she said:

"It is *la Mère Supérieure*. I fear that she is dying." And she clasped her hands in supplication—"If *Madame la Générale*—but I dare not ask."

"What can I do, *ma Soeur*? But surely you can ask."

"It is like this, *Madame la Générale*—the Mother Superior has never been willing to see a doctor, but if you were to ask her." The thin timid hands twisted miserably—"Then the captain who is such a good Catholic and such a great surgeon—"

"You believe that she would consent to see Dr. Gosset if I asked her—"

"I do, madame, I am certain."

"But why, my Sister, should she listen to me? I do not know the Mother Superior. I have never seen her. She has been ill ever since we came."

"Yes, *Madame la Générale*; it is true. But she knows about you. We have told her. I am certain she will do what you ask."

"Then of course I will come."

She led me through the great double doors that divided our two worlds and beyond them I found a dim group of some twenty or thirty nuns crowding the paneled corridor, and they let us pass, bowing their wide white caps all together—it was like a great sweep of white wings—and we went into the room where the Mother Superior was lying. It was a narrow bare white room just like my own save that the small white iron bed had a canopy and a white curtain at its head. The Mother Superior was dressed in a high black stuff dress and she was enormous. She had a great man's face, dark yellow, the color of a man's soiled pigskin glove. Her head was bare, her hair smooth and dark; she was propped up on high white pillows and her great heavy body dressed in hot black as if to go to Mass filled the bed, and all round the bed the nuns were on their knees; I cannot tell you how many there were, I only know that the air was stifling, that I felt I could not breathe.

They made room for me by the bed, edging away without rising from their knees and the swarthy masculine face turned toward me on the pillow and a gash appeared in it, and between the dark dry anguished lips I saw black broken teeth—she had smiled—and then a harsh guttural German voice came from between the lips and it said: "*Madame la Générale*," on a long shuddering sigh.

"Yes, my Mother," I stammered. "I have come to ask you to see Dr. Gosset."

A pair of ancient alien eyes looked into mine, eyes with no message that I could read, suffering dying eyes of an unknowable stranger, of a woman who might once have been a peasant, bending her strong back in the fields, of a woman who might belong even now to the enemy. Then the heavy head made a sign of assent and the eyes closed.

I hurried back to our quarters in search of Gosset, who agreed to go at once. But it was too late. He told me in the afternoon that she was dying

of cancer of the liver. He could do nothing save make her a little more comfortable. And then two days later Sister Marie Jeanne told me that the Mother Superior had died in the night and that her last words had been, "*Madame la Générale est venue me voir.*"

It was the strangest thing. I couldn't believe her. I didn't want to believe her. Why, I asked myself, did this stranger think of me at the very end? She had been the head of a great convent with many young souls in her charge. The fortunes of war and army orders had brought me, a foreigner and an infidel, to her door. Yes, but she had taken me and mine in. We had been living under her roof all that time that she was dying. She had been lying there for weeks in great pain a few paces from my room. And I had never been to see her until Sister Marie Jeanne had plucked up courage to implore me to come. I had thought that I meant nothing to her, that I could mean nothing, but it seemed that she had wanted to see me, had expected the courtesy of a visit and had laid such store by it, though it came so late, that she thought of it as she died.

I went down the next day to the nuns' chapel where she lay in terrifying state. Her monstrous body in its coffin was almost upright behind the lighted candles. They flickered on her huge blind face. And all the chapel was filled with the gentle forms of the novices who kept watch ceaselessly, kneeling before that terrible effigy, their slender heads bowed, their hearts lifted in prayer.

## CHAPTER IV

### I

SPRING brought in no battles on our sector; there was no sound of war in Lorraine. The sky was cloudless and innocent, the air sweet, the untroubled earth went quietly about the business of nourishing all tender green young things and we went quietly about ours, oblivious of the calamity that was bearing down upon France.

I cannot understand why we were not disturbed when Hitler on the ninth of April invaded Norway and Denmark—then on the tenth of May attacked Holland, Luxembourg and Belgium. That was a significant day on which Winston Churchill succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Did I believe that this one man would throw the Germans back, clear them out of the Netherlands, that all would be well now with the Allies because of him? Perhaps I thought his arrival at No. 10 Downing Street a more important event than the Nazi invasion of the low countries—if I did I was probably right. But I do not know what I believed or why I remained undismayed even when on the fourteenth of May the Dutch laid down their arms.

Again, if I had confidence in the French Army and in Great Britain's invincible might, if I believed, quite simply, in victory, is that a sane explanation for the happy folly of those pleasant days? I scarcely think so. I think the answer is to be found somewhere among the imponderables of a private world of illusion, in the hypnotic power of peaceful surroundings that made the horror going on at a distance seem unreal, in the stupefying effect on the senses of a garden fragrant with lilac and in the long soothing arm of a happy childhood, so safe that it made me incapable of belief in disaster.

I find the following written in my diary on April 29th, '40.

Nearly three months since we came to St. Jean. We arrived in icy weather, roads like glass, the land frozen. Now all our huts are buried in greenery. The apple blossom will soon be out in the nuns' orchard.

The patients limp up and down the garden paths or lie on the grass in the sun. It is very peaceful.

"General Réquin came to lunch yesterday with Captain Lecomte. Boddles did the menus. Dodo, Marjorie Fulden and Dorea the lunch table. After lunch we played games and R. showed us how to make paper frogs.

"Huguet has just galloped past my window, leaped on his bicycle and gone off to race Le Canouet to Fénétrange. Our surgeons are all boys except Gosset. He is badly soured up. Says he has *le cafard*. Dr. Bernard says why not since he spends his time listening to the German and Italian news.

"Lecomte doesn't think the war will flare up on the Allied front. He thinks the Germans will stick to their original plan of a defensive wall in the West behind which "*ils vont manger l'Europe*."

## II

Lady Hadfield came for a visit and General Réquin organized a review in her honor. The unit, officers, orderlies, M.T.C. and nurses, marched with the troops round the convent walls and through the village—and after the review we had a banquet with General Réquin and General de Lattre as guests of honor. De Lattre had brought one of his men with him who was a violinist, a *Premier Prix de Rome*. He played exquisitely. It was all very festive. I think Lady Hadfield was pleased. I didn't see her again until five years later. She was in Vichy when the collapse came, and managed to get back to the villa she loved on Cap Ferat, where she remained until '43. But long before she reached England, I had left for the Middle East, so we didn't meet.

We had a series of visitors at St. Jean. B. came in March and spent three days with Réquin. My boy turned up during his Easter recess from Oxford. T. W. took him for a drive through the foothills of the Vosges. Jean took him to Metz. He had a beautiful time. Constance, Cynthia's mother, came for a week end in May. We sat in the garden, played bridge after dinner.

Looking back to those sunny peaceful days, I observe myself standing at the window of my room gazing quietly into the deep garden. I catch the whisk of a white apron disappearing up the path, hear laughter and the chink of teacups from the *popote*, the pulsating amorous croon from someone's gramophone and ask again—Wasn't she frightened, that woman standing in her convent window? Yes, sometimes. But it was only at moments

that she felt a flash of vivid fear. For the most part she seems to have been in a trance.

The German hordes crash into Holland and Belgium, break through at Sedan, divide the French armies, drive the British and the French of the North into the sea at Dunkirk, race on to Amiens, Abbeville, Boulogne and Calais, while she stands there like a fool looking across to the faint silhouette of the hills and murmurs to her idiot self—"Oh lovely world."

Constance wrote the middle of May suggesting that as things looked very bad it might be best to send Cynthia and Rosie to her in Paris until they took a turn for the better. I showed the two girls the letter.

"You can go," I said. "You know that all leave has been stopped in the French Army. Still, you aren't French—none of us are. Nor are we military. We are British and we are volunteers. No one asked us to come here and we are not in fact paid to do what we are doing. So perhaps that lets us out. It depends on how you look at it. I can send you to Paris. No one in my unit is obliged to stay who doesn't want to. But if you go you obviously cannot come back. It is impossible to send you home when things look bad and take you on again when the trouble is over. I'm sure you understand." They did. They were angry with Constance and mortified. Nothing, they declared, would induce them to leave. It was three years before Cynthia saw her mother again.

Gallant? Yes. But if they had cut and run, it would have been contemptible. Nobody did and if anyone wanted to they didn't tell me. The idea of leaving didn't I believe occur to any save one and the less said about her the better. How explain our high spirits during those days of unparalleled disaster? We were a long way from the battle, true. We got little news certainly. But it should have been, God knows, enough. No, I don't think ignorance is the answer. I think these English women failed to understand the menace behind the news, not because it was misleading and scrappy, not because we were drugged by the quiet beauty of our surroundings, and the steady routine of hospital work, but because they had brought with them, each one, an invincible belief in victory—And if our French officers understood better the awful significance of events, it is because they were prepared for defeat.

I remember the day Gosset first used the word in my presence. It was the eleventh of May. Winston Churchill had made his famous speech the day before to the House of Commons warning the British people that he had nothing to offer them but blood, toil, tears and sweat. I had not heard the speech, but I had heard that Hitler on the same day, May 10, had invaded Holland and Belgium. To recall my reaction to this is impossible but I



believe that I swallowed the announcement as I did the usual allowance of disagreeable news, very much as one might swallow a daily dose of castor oil, gulping it down with a spasm of throat and stomach muscles. For I remember feeling tight about the head each morning after I had listened in to Radio Paris.

Gosset was coming down the garden from the officers' *popote*, his queer long passionate face glowering in the sunlight. He too had been listening to the news, but he got his (as I realized later) from Germany—and his “*Bon jour, madame*,” though elaborately polite, had the sound of a snarl.

“What is it, Gosset?” He was so often in a rage with some one of his colleagues or the higher authorities or the world in general that I found it wise to draw his spleen out of him instantly on seeing the thunder threatening on his lofty forehead. So I asked, “What is it?” expecting him to burst into one of his bitter tirades against the fools at the *Service de Santé*.

“*C'est la défaite, madame*.”

“*Comment?*” I was so taken aback that I thought I had misunderstood and said “What?” with the open mouth of a fool.

“I tell you, it is the defeat.”

“What is the defeat?” I was growing angry.

“The Germans have invaded Holland and Belgium. It is the beginning of the end.”

“How can you talk like that, Gosset?”

He shrugged his high shoulders. Was there a gleam of pleasure in his sullen pale gray eyes? I think so. If I didn't see it then I was to recognize it often in the days that followed. For though I left him that morning abruptly, and went off angrily on my own business, he kept coming back to me with his tidbits. Like a great dog he would bring his horrid, gnawed, meaty bones of disaster to lay at my feet, until finally after gloating over the murder of Rotterdam, and the capitulation of the Dutch, he arrived to rub his morbid hands over the break-through at Sedan, and then I turned on him.

I remember my words. They sound futile and childish—they were all I could produce.

“Tell me, Gosset. Let me understand you. Do you seriously believe in a final French and British defeat?”

“But yes.”

“You actually believe that we are going to lose the war?”

“But naturally.”

“Well I don't. And I tell you flatly that I consider such defeatist talk on your part inadmissible. You are the *médecin chef* of this hospital—responsible as I am for the morale of this unit. I cannot help it if you have no faith in

your army. I have in mine. Whatever the French do, the British will never give in. And I can and do insist that you keep your feelings to yourself. You've no right to talk to anyone in this formation as you talk to me. In England we put people in prison for spreading despondency and alarm."

It seems remarkable to me now that after this interchange, we managed to carry on together as well as we did. If Gosset resented my scolding he didn't show it, but continued to come of an afternoon to my garden hut for tea. And though he tempered his pessimism in public, his theme during these tête-à-têtes was always the same, the desperate moral plight of France.

*"Il faut que la France souffre."*

*"La France est dans un tel état que rien qu'un calvaire ne peut la sauver."*

Such statements were constantly on his great curling bitter lips. A complicated man and an unhappy one. I suspect now, though it didn't occur to me at the time, that he wanted a German victory. For when the collapse he awaited did actually come some weeks later he greeted the news with the following words hissed through his teeth:

*"Cela fere du bien à la France de vivre sous le joug Allemand."*

### III

On May 16 General Gamelin ordered the Allies to abandon the line that ran south from Antwerp through Louvain and Namur and fall back to the Scheldt.

On May 17 I wrote in my diary:

I am frightened. I wasn't ever during the last war. I don't think it is fear for my life. Fear for France, for England—for everyone and everything that I know. Gamelin's order to his troops to die rather than give way a foot of soil sounds desperate. Invited the officers to the *popote*. Two tables of bridge—the rest played a child's game called *Liar*. Their shouts of laughter made me wonder. But the evening was a success.

May 19th. Gosset tells me that every mobile unit in the north similar to ours has either been wiped out or evacuated to the rear. Horrible stories of nurses of an ambulance he knew being drowned trying to cross a river under fire—What river?

20th. Réquin has telephoned to tell me B. has been made "*Général de division*." Major general. So I fancy Winston is going to make use of him.

He did. The two prime ministers of Great Britain and France were as well ministers of defense, and Churchill had appointed B. as his personal

representative with Reynaud, in that capacity. But I didn't know this until later.

22nd. French radio announces Germans at Amiens and Arras. Italian says Abbeville. Gosset says there is a rumor that General Giraud and all his staff have been taken prisoner. Listened in with Maureen to the B.B.C. at midnight. Worst moment of the day when the English voice was blotted out by a German. Very queer to feel that the road to Calais and Dover is cut—that I could only get the girls home via Havre or perhaps Dieppe. Feeling of being very far away—and we are.

23rd. Feel better today. Wireless announced that General Spears had spoken to France in French, recalling 1914. Wish I could have heard his voice. Such a lovely evening. The sunlight is streaming down through the branches outside my window. Nancy Wright is stretched out on a deck chair in the garden reading. All is peaceful.

25th. Wireless report Germans in Boulogne. Have spent 2,000 francs on a good set (found it in Sarrebourg) so that we can hear England even if we can't get there. The boom of Big Ben is wonderful. It reassures like the thought of Winston Churchill.

May 28th. Yesterday should have been a gala day. General Réquin was to have come to dinner. He was sending his film unit to entertain us afterwards. But the day began with Paul Reynaud's announcement that the King of the Belgians had betrayed France and ordered his army to capitulate. Everyone subdued. A sunlit nightmare. Expected a *contre-ordre* from Réquin all day. It didn't come so we went on with our gala preparations. The film unit turned up at 5:30. I made up my face and got into clean clothes at 6. A small car arrived soon after loaded with flowers, huge masses of peonies, lupins, poppies etc. "*Le général vous envoie des fleurs.*" At 6:30 "*Le général vous demande au téléphone.*" It was to tell me that he couldn't dine. Was leaving in the morning. "*On a besoin de moi ailleurs.*" I had a moment of panic—asked if I could come to say good-by. Yes. Hurried out to tell Gosset. Left at 8 with T. W. driving and Lemaire (my military chauffeur) on the box with a disquieting gun. Strange drive through the darkening country. Crimson glow in the sky. Wide, rolling dark fields. Was afraid in a new way. Réquin is a friend. If the Germans come down from the north—if the war spreads to our sector, threatens to engulf Lorraine, he wouldn't forget us, would warn us in time. I could trust him. But now. Who is there?

Packing cases filled the hall at Vic. Captain Lecomte, suave, graceful, unruffled, took us in to the general. Very somber, subdued talk. His first

words, "*Cela va si vite.*" Then "*La volonté peut peut-être faire quelque chose contre les machines, je ne sais pas.*" Then "*Nous allons voir des batailles terribles. J'ai vu tous mes officiers, ils ont une telle confiance que j'en ai peur. Nous sommes un contre deux ou trois. Ils vont s'acharner à Paris. C'est l'ordre de Weygand de mourir sur place.*"

He spoke in a small dry voice. He was very white, his face rigid. In the presence of his intense preoccupation I was diffident about mentioning my own apprehension. But I told him I felt somewhat lost—"Je me suis un peu perdue"—and asked if we could follow his army. He said he would send for us if it was possible. I went with him to find Lecomte to say good-by. I asked him to see that we were sent for, he bowed and answered with a little smile, "*Je m'en chargerai, madame.*"

## CHAPTER V

### I

T. W. DROVE me through the night to St. Jean. She had waited in the car while I talked to Réquin and asked no questions when I came out. I said "General Réquin is leaving. Home, please." Lecomte stood in the lighted doorway, as we moved off.

The dark fields of Lorraine were desolate. Strange fields of a strange land. I was turning my back on England. I felt a little sick, my head was tight again inside an iron band. "You are frightened," I told myself. Yes. Réquin had frightened me. The war seemed to be waiting out there in the dark beyond the headlights of the car, like a pack of wolves.

Staring at T. W.'s steady shoulders, I thought, "How shall I get the girls home if the worst happens?" And I followed the road back to Paris in my mind. (How long would it remain open?) And beyond Paris? Which port should we make for? Dieppe, Le Havre, Cherbourg? It would depend on the enemy. Cherbourg was the best bet. They wouldn't reach Cherbourg.

There had been treachery, they said, in the IIInd Army. The French hadn't blown up the bridges. But that, someone said, was because of the refugees. You couldn't, it appeared, blow up bridges packed with women and children who were flying for their lives—not if you were civilized—you would prefer to let the enemy across.

But what did I mean by the words "if the worst happened"? Well, if Weygand didn't close the gap, if German armor fanned out, turned south as well as north, attacked the IVth Army from the rear. All those little men in their underground forts of the Maginot Line, what good would they be then? And there was no IVth Army now in Lorraine. Réquin was taking it with him. His staff, he had said, and some divisions. There would be troops of course left to hold our sector. There would be a battle, many wounded. Well, that was what we had come for.

But why, a sick voice whispered, have you come, why bring twenty-five English girls to this far eastern corner of France? What induced you to assume such responsibility? The French are not your people. No, but they are allies. France is not your country. No, but our battle is joined in France.

When we defend France we are defending our own soil, it's the same thing. Is it? Would you be willing to die in defense of the Convent of St. Jean, as you would be ready to die for any British workingman's cottage?

Be quiet.

All right. All right, but if the worst came to the worst, who would you count on?

T. W. obviously. Dorea, Barbara, Maria. I could count on the whole British lot to hold together, do what was expected of them. Even the more foolish and less plucky would stick it. They'd have to. The worse things got, the tighter the bond that bound us together. But what of the French? Would they feel bound to us? I thought of Gosset. Who could foretell the behavior in a crisis of that gloomy incalculable man? He awaited defeat with bitter exultation, but curiously enough I felt that he would behave well, out of pride, out of hatred, out of revenge. Because we, the British, had brought this war on France, had come in our insolence to witness her crucifixion, because we were the real enemy, he would heap coals of fire on our heads, save us if he could, if not go down with us into the German maw.

Then there was Dr. Bernard. A Jew though his face didn't carry the signature of his race. It was more like the face of an Englishman than any of the others. I had always counted on him as a special friend and ally. He had been the peacemaker in the unit, his gentleness and his reasonableness had been soothing to Gosset. His value lay in his kindness and his understanding of our English ways. One couldn't tell how he would behave in danger. He would remain calm, he was much less excitable than the other, but would he show courage and energy? And again, what of the three young surgeons? And Lelong, our chemist, and Rousset? They were ready enough to beguile the time and forget the war in flirtations, but what claim had we on any of them? Up against the ultimate test of survival, wouldn't they become strangers? Who was there in the French Army who would care in the last resort what became of the Strawberry Queen? General Réquin. Yes. He would care. He had made himself responsible for us. Now that he had gone, there was no one. Well, we must follow him. Lecomte had promised to see we were sent for. And we would be sent for. We must stick to the IVth Army. It was the best I could do for the girls, the only precaution that I had a right to take.

## II

It was late when we got back but Gosset was waiting to tell me that my husband had been on the phone and would ring up again. I stared dumb-

founded. Then B. must be in Paris. The news, with its sudden content of relief, reassurance, promise of help, made me feel weak in the knees. We went to my garden hut and T. W. produced cold sausage and champagne, the remains of the gala dinner that General Réquin had meant to attend. How long ago it seemed. The hut was full of the flowers he had sent. I told Gosset that Réquin was moving to another sector and would send for us. He scowled. Should I tell him the rest? No—better not—better tell no one.

Then the telephonist came running up the shadowed garden to fetch me. I hurried back with him and was immediately involved in a violent argument with the voice I preferred to all voices in the world of men.

It was wonderful. He was so cross, so natural, so incredibly cantankerous, that all the world seemed normal and ordinary.

Yes, he was in Paris. But where had I been? Why hadn't I been there when he first called up? What did I mean by rushing about the country at this time of night?

I had been to see Réquin.

Why?

Well, for reasons—

What reasons?

Never mind, they were good reasons. Was he staying on in Paris?

Yes—for a bit.

For how long?

He couldn't say.

What was he doing?

He couldn't say that, either. What he wanted to say, if I would only give him a chance, was that we were on no account to move from our present position. Did I understand? We were not to move.

But we probably would move.

What?

I had just asked to be moved. It was wiser.

Wiser to move? Nonsense. I was talking nonsense.

A difficult conversation since we could say nothing of military matters, but very revivifying.

He had been very upset by an account of the German bombing of a big hospital in Ostend. This news he gave me. Nothing more. I understood well enough what he was feeling about that. He feared the same thing might happen to us and believed we were comparatively safe in our far corner. Well, I couldn't argue with him over the phone, explain that Réquin was going.

He would ring up again, he said, in a day or two. In the meantime I was

not to move. If I wanted to get hold of him I was to ask for *l'Ambassade d'Angleterre*—and would be put through immediately.

He rang off. I said to myself, "It's all very well for him to talk like that. If we get orders to move, we move. I know I'm right about sticking to Réquin and the IVth Army."

I felt much better. If I had known what he knew I would have felt worse, but I didn't.

Our orders to pack up and be ready to take the road came next day. General Réquin had acted quickly—or was Gosset right in thinking this had nothing to do with Réquin? However that might be, we were to evacuate all the patients who could be safely sent to the rear, hand over to another unit and stand by.

B. rang up again that night. He was furious when I told him. He was flying to London in two or three days and wanted me to come to Paris at once. I said it was impossible and was roundly trounced over the wire, but stuck to it. I couldn't come.

Strange to recall those quarrels over the telephone. I longed to go to him. But we had stripped the wards, loaded up the lorries, were expecting our movement orders any day—any hour. How could I go to Paris? The unit might move off while I was gone.

Every night or two he came through on the phone. Each time more urgent. He wanted to see me. He particularly wanted to see me. Didn't I understand? Didn't I want to come? Of course, I wanted to come. But I couldn't.

He flew to London, was back two days later. I had no idea what he went for. Dunkirk in the meantime was evacuated. A quarter of a million British troops and a hundred and fifty thousand French were rescued from the beaches. We knew nothing about this. All was quiet in our sector. We had handed over our patients to their new nurses and were waiting with nothing to do but sit in the garden, go fishing, play the gramophone.

Extraordinary to remember my utter ignorance of what was going on. I had had a moment of horrid realization the evening I said good-by to Réquin. It had passed, I was my normal pigheaded optimistic self again. I hadn't the sense to be frightened any more or to realize what lay behind my husband's urgency.

No two people could have been more eager, each one to make the other understand, nor more hopelessly at odds while they talked together than B. and I during those brief exasperating telephone calls.

The trouble was that he could explain nothing. I knew that Winston must have sent him to Paris, but I didn't know what his job was; I had no



idea that as Winston's personal representative with Paul Reynaud he was in daily contact with the French Premier, Pétain and Weygand, and French G.H.Q. and was striving with all his might, not only to make the French understand and trust the British, but to make them believe in victory—so how could I know that he was fighting a losing battle against the mass defeatism of the French Army, that the attitude of Pétain, Weygand and Reynaud himself filled him with the gravest misgivings and that he already envisaged the total collapse of French armed resistance.

I, at my end of France, knew only what the wireless allowed us to know. Reynaud told us to put our trust in Pétain, the hero of Verdun, and Weygand, the trusted chief of staff of the great Maréchal Foch. If there was a note of hysteria in the French Premier's voice when he implored us to have confidence in these great men of another war, if a horrid doubt made me shudder for an instant, it was only for an instant. The girls, with nothing to do, were clamoring to be allowed to go to Sarrebourg, Saverne, the lakes, the mountains. Why keep them cooped up? It was summer; the sun was shining, there wasn't an airplane to be seen in the sky. Oh, all right, they could go on their picnic provided I knew just where they were going. I turned on the wireless. A voice exhorted courage, confidence across the sunny air of my little white room. Maureen brought in a tray with coffee. Dorea followed with a pot of honey.

"Cheer up, May. If they are back by seven, it'll be all right. Even if we get orders to move this minute, we couldn't leave till tomorrow. There's the kitchen to pack up and our own belongings—and T. W. says your car has blown a gasket—and Barbara is in a frenzy over the Bedford. Turn off that wireless, it's all lies anyhow, and have some coffee. Here's to the Weygand Line."

How could I know that France was crumbling under our feet? Our part of France was utterly peaceful. Never had she been more beautiful. Why should I sit in my room with this wretched wireless?

Boddles came running one Sunday morning. "You must come, May. I've found an enchanted village. Too fantastic. It's strawberry pink. Too lovely—you must come—you must. Where are your paints?"

She whirled me away up the road to Saverne and there it was—an absurd storybook village perched on the side of a green hill. All the little houses were the color of strawberries. The mountain rising steep behind them was vivid green. We set up our easels beside the village street. The sun poured down. White fluffy clouds sailed softly overhead. How lovely it was. Presently the young men and maidens of the village gathered round us, in their Sunday best. "Bon jour," they said gaily and stood watching us, laughing pleasantly

among themselves. Then an old old man, bent almost double, came out of a door at the far end of the dreaming street under the big green mountain and began ringing a great bell and he was calling out something in a thin cracked voice, and the young men and maidens all laughed when they saw him coming in the distance, but I couldn't hear what he was calling, so I said, "What is he calling out?" And they answered, "Oh, it's only old Auguste, the town crier, calling a new class to the colors"—and went off laughing, their arms round each other's waists. That was how the war appeared in Lorraine.

B. rang up again that night and ordered me this time to come to Paris.

"This is an order, you understand."

"It's no good talking like that. I can't leave I tell you."

"Why? What are you doing?"

"Waiting. As a matter of fact I've been painting with Elaine up the Saverne road."

"What?" His voice was a roar. "Did you say painting?"

"Yes—water colors."

He thought I'd gone mad—but when he said so, I put it down as just a way of showing ill temper. That it was insane to go on a sketching expedition within a few miles of the Germans didn't seem to strike anyone, even Gosset. At last, however, on the sixth of June (German armor was dashing forward from a Somme bridgehead making for Rouen and the Seine), I started for Paris in the Buick, our most reliable staff car, Barbara Graham driving and Lemaire beside her again with his rifle.

A note in my diary reminds me that Gosset was in a state about my going. He was in fact dead against it, fearing the road might be cut by German raiders. All our officers were against it, for that matter. Dr. Bernard said he could not attempt to dissuade me as my husband had sent for me—but—well, they would be anxious until I got safely back. Boutron offered to go with me to protect me; an offer I lightheartedly refused. Indeed I didn't see how the gentle creature could help me much against German armed raiders—nor did I believe such an encounter probable. I hadn't a qualm as I drove off. My one worry was the thought that the unit might get orders to move while I was gone. But I was only spending one night in Paris. I would be back the next day. Still, to make quite certain we decided to go via Troyes and stop on the way at General Réquin's headquarters. If orders to move had been sent, he would tell me and I would turn back.

Colonel Dumas, chief of staff at IVth Army, was very surprised when I walked in. The general, he regretted to say, was absent. He would be *désolé* to have missed my visit. Yes. Everything was arranged. It had been a little

difficult. The *Grand Q.G.* had made difficulties but the general had won the day and we were to join up with the IVth Army as promised. Soon? Yes, quite soon. The sooner in fact, the better. But I could quite well go on 'to Paris and return next day. Why not dine with the general and sleep at Châlons on my way back to St. Jean? They were moving their H.Q. in the morning to a village near Châlons. He would show me the place on the map. If Miss Graham would look—

Miss Graham studied the large scale map on the wall, compared it with her own road map and marked the place where the general would expect us to dine. It sounded delightful. Colonel Dumas conducted me to my car. He paused at the top of the steps and looked at me out of dark harassed brown eyes. Did I believe that all would be well?

It was only much later that I realized how odd it was of him to put me such a question. The look in his eyes as he spoke must have startled me—for I remembered it. I had caught sight for an instant of a mind assailed with horrid doubt. But I dismissed it at the time and went happily on my way.

An uneventful journey. Barbara drove with her usual elegance. We were lucky, we said, to find so few convoys on the road. There was nothing in fact to suggest any new menace to Paris save the cement road blocks as we neared the Porte de Vincennes. We weren't stopped. No control post asked for our papers. We rolled through the strangely empty Paris streets in the late afternoon and arrived at the Ritz where B., I knew, was staying.

It was very quiet in the Ritz. There was no one about but the concierge.

I asked if the general was expecting me.

But certainly—if I cared to go up, the rooms were on the second floor.

Was he there?

No. He was at his office.

Then I would telephone first.

The concierge was sorry. There was no telephone.

No telephone at the Ritz?

No—the telephone was cut off. Government orders. There were no civil telephones now in Paris.

What was I to do?

I would find the general at the British Embassy. If I cared to go.

I did. I went back to the car and explained to Barbara. "He's at the Embassy. I can't telephone. Telephone's cut off. Let's go."

B. was with the Ambassador when I arrived. His secretary, a very pleasant Englishwoman, was typing by the window as I was shown into his office. She went to fetch him. I waited. Then he came in and as I looked at his face, the world of illusion that I had been living in vanished.

I had been thinking of him as he was in 1916, when I first saw him at Bray-sur-Somme; we had met during one war, now we met again in another, and I was horrified. His eyes were bloodshot. There were lines inches deep in his face. But it was not because he was twenty-five years older. I had seen him two months before when he came to stay with Réquin. Then, he hadn't looked like this. Never had I seen him look like this. His smile of greeting was sweet, it was the same old smile. The horrible thing was that it didn't belong to his face, only crept on to it for an instant, then was gone, leaving it naked, ravaged, savage and exhausted. I saw, as I looked, what was happening to France—and I saw, for one second, what was going to happen. The war leaped at me out of his eyes. I was terrified.

We said little. He had only a few minutes to give me. We could talk, he said, later. I was to go back to the Ritz, order a cold supper for two in his sitting room; he hoped to join me by nine.

My instinct warned me to be matter of fact.

"How is Paul Reynaud?"

He didn't answer. I waited. He said nothing.

It took me a minute to digest the meaning of this—then—

"And Weygand?"

"Weygand went near the battle some days ago. He hasn't yet recovered from the shock."

"I don't understand."

"Weygand has never commanded troops in the field. He always had staff jobs in the last war. He had never been under fire until the other day. He is a very old man."

"Then you don't believe in him?"

"I never believed in him."

"But if the Weygand Line doesn't hold—what happens?"

"God knows—"

I went back to the Ritz. Cynthia's mother was at Vichy but her American stepfather, Bill Gower, was in Paris and Barbara was to spend the night at their flat. Lemaire was to stay with the car. She deposited me at the Ritz, would call for me with car and Lemaire at eight next morning. It was awkward not being able to telephone—if anything happened—but nothing would happen before morning.

I went up to B.'s rooms, ordered our cold supper in the salon for nine o'clock and had a hot bath. The rooms gave on the garden. All was quiet. There seemed to be no one in the hotel. Michael's photograph stood on the table. Michael was in England. When would I see him again?

## III

It was ten before B. got back. He kissed me absent-mindedly. When he had had a wash we sat down to supper. Cold chicken and ham, salad, Camembert cheese, a bottle of Chablis.

"About our moving—I want to explain."

"Yes?" He was only half listening. Immense preoccupations absorbed him. He looked at me like a blind man.

"Réquin is a friend. If we get into trouble I can turn to him for advice—otherwise in the confusion we might be forgotten—"

The telephone rang. He had an Embassy extension in his sitting room. It was Maureen calling from St. Jean to say that they had received orders to move next morning, would I please start back at once? I couldn't hear her distinctly nor could she hear me.

"You want me to come back tonight?"

"Yes. We leave first thing in the morning."

"But I was told at Troyes—"

"I can't hear—"

"I was told by Colonel Dumas—"

"Colonel who?"

"Never mind. Hold on a minute—"

I turned to B. "I've got to go back—now—tonight."

"Nonsense."

"But I must. They are leaving early in the morning. It's a six hours' run."

"You can't. Where's your car?"

"I don't know."

"Well then—"

I spoke again on the phone. "I'll start back," I said, "by midnight—should be with you by six."

She rang off.

There was a knock on the door. A gentleman was announced. Very grave, very correct. He presented himself. He was Monsieur le Grand. He apologized for disturbing us. He was Captain Lecomte's father-in-law and he had a message for me. The message was to the effect that General Réquin would expect me to dine with him the next night at the place that had been shown me that morning on the map.

I thanked him. He bowed and withdrew.

"I must now," I said, "get hold of Barbara."

"You must first finish your supper."

I ate my chicken, gulped down a glass of Chablis.

"How can I get hold of her?"

"Where is she?"

"At Constance's flat. Can you send a car?"

"Yes—if you must go." He looked dreadfully tired.

"I must," I said.

Then Barbara and Bill Gower walked in.

"Barbara! How extraordinary! I was just going to send for you. We've got to go back tonight."

"I'm sorry, May. We can't. I've wrecked the car. Ran into one of those road blocks in the dark."

"Where is the car?"

"In the middle of the Champs Elysées where I crashed."

"Can't you get it repaired?"

"Afraid not. It's a total wreck."

I was frantic. I lost my temper. What to do? It was by now nearly midnight. I kept repeating that I must get back. If the unit moved off without us, we might never find them. Barbara had no more to say. I was sorry I had lost my temper. It wasn't her fault. She didn't know about the road blocks in the Champs Elysées. But there it was. We were stranded without a car and had two hundred and fifty miles to do before morning.

B. took matters in hand. He would ask General Colson, French chief of staff at the *Ministère de la Guerre*, to send us back early in the morning. But he could not and would not disturb him before seven. I must get through to Gosset, tell him what had happened and say that I would leave as early as possible.

I got Gosset without delay. What? I had meant to start back tonight? Quite unnecessary. Madame Schreiber was mistaken. She had acted without his knowledge. They were not leaving until one o'clock. *Treize heures*. If I left by eight in the morning all would be well.

B. said, "You women!" I told Barbara I was sorry I'd been angry, that if she would collect Lemaire and be at the Ritz at eight o'clock I'd be ready. B. would get us a car somehow.

It was one in the morning when Barbara and Bill left us. A peculiar evening. We prepared for bed. Had just turned out the light when the bombing began. It was spasmodic, but combined with my anxiety about the unit made sleep impossible. I woke B. at seven and he rang Colson. "*Ma femme est en panne. Sa formation fait mouvement.*" Colson agreed at once. A fast car would be at the Ritz by eight o'clock. I dressed, packed my bag, drank some coffee—said good-by. B. was talking to London on the telephone as I left the room. He waved a distraught hand.

It was Saturday the seventh of June. German armor sweeping south, reached Rouen the next day, crossed the Seine on the tenth and entered Paris on the fourteenth. B. had been to London and had rejoined Reynaud on the Loire by that time, but I knew nothing about that. My line of communication with my husband snapped as I left the Ritz. I didn't see him or hear from him again until I reached England on the twenty-sixth of July. It was to be five years before I went back to Paris.

## CHAPTER VI

### I

THE car General Colson had put at my disposal was a supercharged Peugeot shaped like a torpedo. Two lean, swarthy, hawk-faced French soldiers in steel helmets, one at the wheel, the other with a rifle between his knees, were in front. Barbara and I wedged ourselves into the narrow back seat, Lemaire between us, our bags under our feet. We were very cramped. It was eight-thirty. I said, "We must make St. Jean le Bassel by one." The eagle at the wheel nodded. We shot across the Place Vendôme.

I like being driven fast. The girls knew this and would go all out on the straight. But the straight and the crooked were all the same to this driver. Traffic lights, control posts, convoys, farm wagons, market squares and crowded thoroughfares were no obstacle. Never before or since have I been driven as I was driven that day. The car in those steel hands was a live thing. It was like being on the back of the winner in a dog race. We made St. Didier by ten forty-five. We were halfway and had averaged just over sixty miles an hour. But it took us half an hour to get petrol. Barbara hadn't spoken nor I—with the car lurching and leaping through the air, talk was impossible. But at the petrol point we looked at each other.

"Can we make it, Barbara?"

"I don't think so. He can't keep it up. No man could."

It was a quarter past twelve when we reached Nancy and I realized as we left the town that the superb silent creature in charge was slacking off very slightly.

Should I say anything? I remember, as if it were yesterday, staring with awe at those lean shoulders, that narrow, steady head—those incredible hands. Then I leaned forward.

"If you can keep up your speed," I said, "we can just do it."

He stiffened. It was like touching a racehorse with the whip. The speedometer moved to kilos 120. We turned sharp right in Fénétrange on two wheels at one-fifteen and pulled up at one-thirty in front of the convent gates to find the hospital convoy drawn up in the road about to move off.



We had done the two hundred and fifty miles in four hours and a half. Ten minutes later we were on our way back along the road we had come.

Barbara and Lemaire tumbled out. Gosset stepped forward. I stood in the road. Would I please stay where I was. Everyone was placed. He had given orders that none were to leave their vehicles. If I would be so kind as not to disturb his arrangements. There was unfortunately no room for me in the convoy. Without the Buick it had been extremely difficult to caser everyone. Miss Fuhlroth was installed in my Renault with her bad leg (she had phlebitis) on a *strapontin*, thus taking up two places. Madame Schreiber and Dr. le Canouet were traveling with her. Lemaire could get into the old Bedford with the French orderlies. Miss Graham would join Miss Toulmin and Dr. Guénin, but it would cause the greatest confusion if I insisted on transferring myself to the Renault. I could see for myself that the Ford station wagons were packed with nurses.

There was nothing for it but to stick to General Colson's car for the rest of the day.

I turned to my hawk-faced driver. Could he drive me back? But certainly, his orders were to take me to my destination—what was our destination?

A place, Gosset said, called Maison Blanche.

And where was that?

It was fifteen miles south of Châlons.

We were to go back?

Just so. He unfolded his map—pointed it out to my driver. It was a hundred miles back on the road to Paris.

So we needn't have been in such a hurry.

No. He had expected to meet us on the road.

The two eagles in helmets made no sign. They had been told to bring me to St. Jean as quickly as possible. They had done what they were told. I turned again to Gosset.

Were we to set up the hospital at Maison Blanche?

He didn't know. We would get further orders when we arrived. If I would be good enough to step into my car.

Maureen had joined me and was staring at me intently. I could see Evelyn lying back on a white pillow in the Renault. Cheerful hands waved to me from car windows. But where were the nuns? Where was Sister Marie Jeanne? She would be sad if I didn't say good-by to her. But Gosset was pawing the ground.

*"Allons madame, en route."*

Then Maureen intervened. Hadn't I better have something to eat? Certainly, Gosset snapped. I could stop at the café in Fénétrange if I was

hungry and catch them up. I said I would do that. My two escorts were hungry, if I was not.

We moved off. Our retreat had begun. We didn't suspect it, but the Hadfield-Spears Unit was to keep on moving till it reached England.

I don't know how or why it was that Nancy Wright got in beside me. I thought she was Barbara, but when we stopped at Fénétrange I found it was Wright. I said, "Oh it's you, Nancy," and stumbled into the café. But we were too late. There was no food, only coffee and beer. So we sat with the two drivers drinking coffee while they devoured their rations, and I think Nancy told me the story of those last hours of incredible confusion, of how everyone had got in everyone's way, how Boddles had kept them all waiting, and how Kelsey's little Zouave had cried and had nearly fallen out of the window waving good-by. It was very hot in the café, my head was swimming and I don't remember very clearly what she said, but I do recall the savage gleam of our drivers' great knives as they slashed at their hunks of bread, and the buzzing as it seemed of a myriad flies. Then we were off again at the same headlong speed, lurching and leaping over the road.

The country fled past again. There was the turn to Vic. What ages it seemed since I had taken it to say good-by to Réquin. He was expecting me to dine with him somewhere, where was it? Someone had turned up with a message, a nice man, while I was at supper with B. Poor B. I must ring him up from Maison Blanche. How worried he was about Reynaud, and they had once been such friends. The little Frenchman had seemed so full of fire and ardor when he came to see us in London. The best of the lot, B. had said. But that had been long ago in another world. A world where one only talked of war. I hadn't even kissed B. good-by. He was at the telephone, had waved a hand. I wished—Oh I wished—

The car gave a bound, I swung against Wright and came back to the present. Our job was to set up our hospital at Maison Blanche and be prepared to take in the wounded. "*Nous allons avoir des batailles terribles*," Réquin had said—so we were in for a busy time.

After that it was all like a dream where everything you grasp melts in your hand, familiar things twist into ghostly shapes. And all through the dream I was being rushed through space at breakneck speed in a car driven by grinning demons—toward a place that didn't exist.

We passed our convoy just beyond Nancy, catching up first the heavy lorries, then the old Bedford with its load of orderlies, then the two Dodge vans. Dorea seemed to be in trouble. Wilky driving the Hotchkiss wore an agonized expression. Cynthia was leading in her Ford station wagon with

Dr. Guénin standing on the running board. In a flash we had left them behind.

I tried to imagine our new hospital in Maison Blanche, pictured to myself a large white house, nice clean wards like those in the convent, rows of neat beds with white sheets, blue blankets.

But when we reached the spot on the map there was no such place as Maison Blanche. No large white house, nor even a small house, no village nor house of any kind, nothing but a dream forest of great trees and a crossroads and a couple of distracted French officers waving their arms at the passing motors who told me to turn left and proceed to Chatel Raoult where Ambulance 282 was to be billeted for the night.

But the forest and the dream deepened as we sped south and when we reached Chatel Raoult all we found was a deaf commandant, who knew nothing about us, hidden away in a jungle in a little wooden pavilion—and it was like a scene in a fairy tale. The grass was so high round the porch that the pavilion was smothered and the late afternoon sunlight streaming into his untidy room was very hot, and spread over everything was deep silence and dust. He was a sad, gray little man, very deaf, with weak watery eyes, and he had received no orders nor any warning of our coming. No one had thought to tell him, or perhaps he hadn't heard when they told him over the telephone, but when at last I did make him hear and he realized that thirty women were descending on him for the night he was very frightened and said in the curious small voice of the very deaf, "*Mais madame, je ne peux pas. Il n'y a rien ici, rien,*" and indeed there did seem to be nothing, nothing but great silent trees and an old barn.

Gosset had said we would receive further orders when we reached our destination, and this apparently was it, but there were no orders. There must be some mistake. The *Service de Santé* couldn't be mad enough to expect us to set up our hospital in a jungle. How would we get the wounded? How send them on? There wasn't a sign of an ambulance, nor of any military vehicle of any kind. Not a living soul to be seen, for that matter. The commandant appeared to be quite alone. I must find General Wörms, make him do something. But where was the *Service de Santé*? I turned to the commandant.

"I must telephone the *Service de Santé*."

"*Comment, madame?*" He held his right ear with his hand and blinked.

"I must telephone," I shouted, "to the *Service de Santé*."

"What *Service de Santé*, madame?"

"The *Service de Santé* of the IVth Army."

"Which army did you say?"

"The IVth Army. I want to speak to the *Médecin Inspecteur* Wörms." He shook his head. "I am sorry."

"General Wörms," I shouted. "I want to speak to the *Médecin Inspecteur* of the IVth Army, General Wörms."

He had either never heard of General Wörms, or he didn't hear now. A horrid suspicion darted into my mind.

"Don't you belong to the IVth Army?" I screamed into his poor deaf ear.

"But no, madame, I belong to the—the region of the rear."

"But we have been sent here to rejoin the IVth Army."

He blinked again. I gave it up, and went out into the porch, leaving him waving his helpless little hands.

"What sort of a war is this?" I grumbled to Nancy Wright. "How in heaven's name are we supposed to set up a hospital in this place?"

"*Dans la verdure peut-être, madame. Ici il n'y a que de la verdure.*"

It was the commandant again at my elbow, hearing for once when hearing was useless, and using a phrase that I had never heard applied to a hospital before but was to hear often enough during the days that followed. I thought it funny at the time, or perhaps I was slightly hysterical for I remember turning to Wright and saying, "He suggests we should put up our tents in the greenery"—and going off into a wild fit of laughter.

"But we aren't prepared—" Sister Wright was shocked.

"Of course, we are not prepared."

"We have only three tents, one for the theater, one for the reception, one for stores."

"I know."

"We were never intended—"

"You're telling me—"

"We must have a building of some sort to house the patients."

"A building. Exactly. A building—well, there's a barn over there."

But here was the Renault with Maureen and Fuhlroth and Le Canouet and here came Gosset, thank God, in his two-seater. This was his show. This was his war, whatever he might feel about it. I would let him cope with Wörms and the *Service de Santé* and *la verdure* and all the rest of it.

The remainder of that day is a blur. Maureen told me later that I looked so wildly exhausted when she arrived at Chatel Raoult that she thought it best to take me away from the others. I daresay she was right. I remember finding myself in a hot hotel bedroom, sitting vaguely on a hard yellow chair opposite a dizzy wall covered with pink roses—and asking where I was.

"We're in Châlons."

"Oh, are we all here?"

"No."

"Why not? Where are the others?"

"Gosset has taken them to a village called St. Chéron."

"Where is that?"

"Thirty miles south. We'll join them tomorrow."

"South, you say?"

"Yes. South."

"Well, that's a good thing."

I remember no more. I fell on my bed and slept like a log, till morning, reassured, please note the foolishness of it, by the thought that the girls were thirty miles farther from the enemy than I was.

There is, I fear, a good deal that was idiotic in my conduct during the forty-eight hours that followed my departure from the Ritz. My mad dash across France had been unnecessary. To have allowed myself to be whisked away from the unit to Châlons for the night was wrong and very unwise. For General Colson's car was gone. The eagles having landed us at the only hotel still open in Châlons had gone back to Paris. We were without transport in a town awaiting the arrival of the enemy. We didn't know this. That is to say we didn't believe, though we knew the Germans weren't far off, that they would get through. Why we didn't believe it, I can't tell you. But it was so. And this, in spite of the fright B. had given me in Paris. It doesn't make sense, as I say, it was idiocy, to go peacefully to sleep while Maureen hunted the ghostly streets along the Marne for a telephone.

She found one in a cellar, and a captain who telephoned to Réquin's headquarters and promised to lend us a car to take us there if we would turn up at his office at eight o'clock in the morning. Then she too came back to the deserted hotel and to bed. And in the morning, rested, refreshed, full of confidence, there we were, a couple of fools discussing solemnly over our excellent coffee the problem of finding a suitable place in which to install the hospital. That, I declared, was the first thing and Réquin must help us. He must requisition a château somewhere or a school. Worms was hopeless. Fancy sending us on a wild-goose chase to a place like Chatel Raoult. We agreed, very smug we were on the way to General Réquin's headquarters, that the confusion, the lack of control and direction in the *Service de Santé* was shocking.

"I must ring up B.," I said, "as soon as we are installed and have a telephone number of our own." The idea that 282 was never to have such a thing again didn't occur to me as a remote possibility.

General Réquin's headquarters were this time in a large pleasant farm-

house. Captain Lecomte received us and conducted us to the general's office. He looked more cheerful than at our last meeting.

"You didn't give us the pleasure of your company at dinner after all."

"No. I'm sorry. We received orders to move. I rejoined the unit. It was late by the time I reached Châlons."

It was, he said, of no consequence. We were here, that was the main thing. But where exactly were we?

I said I didn't quite know and explained what had happened. He was incensed. I must see Wörms immediately, he declared, and decide myself where I would set up my hospital. He would like to have us as near as possible to his headquarters so that he could keep an eye on us. He would telephone Wörms that I was coming. The doctors seemed to make a sad muddle of their affairs. If I had any trouble with Wörms, I was to let him know.

I thanked him. Maureen and I got up to go. He stopped us to point out his sector on the map, and the plain of Champagne spreading behind it. "Clean as a table," he said in his dry way. "Nothing to hang on to. I shall try to hold them on the Aisne."

He came with us to the front door. "At night when I can't sleep," he said, "I think sometimes of Mademoiselle Alice and her handsome Zouave." He smiled. We were in full retreat before I saw him again.

We found Gosset with General Wörms in a stuffy little house in the village of Songy. Wörms in a dither, Gosset very angry. It was to be our last conference with the *Service de Santé*. Though we didn't know it, there would be no more talk after today about a suitable place for our hospital. We were about to be scattered over the country like chaff in a high wind. The fact that nothing we said that day mattered in the least makes my conduct no more excusable.

I had done an unpardonable thing, Gosset put it bluntly, in going over Wörms's head to the army commander. I said I was sorry, that I had no such intention. I had gone to the general merely to ask for a car to take me to St. Chéron, to which Gosset replied rudely that had I stayed with the unit I would have had no need of a car. Maureen very pink said it had been absolutely necessary to find me a bed, I had been exhausted. Gosset gave a snort. Wörms waved his worried little hands over the map on the table. "*Voyons—Il s'agit de vous trouver un emplacement.*"

Gosset flung a long leg over his knee and stared out of the little window into the hot street. It was all very unpleasant. I knew I was in the wrong, but I didn't trust Wörms and I did trust Réquin and I was by that time in such a rage with Gosset that when Wörms suggested sending us to Troyes

to work in the big military hospital of that town I turned the suggestion down flat. Troyes? But Troyes was a hundred and fifty kilometers behind the lines. We were a mobile field unit and a self-contained unit. To attach us to a great military base hospital was to destroy our *raison d'être*.

Poor little Wörms. I can see his worried pinched old face. But he was right that day and I was wrong. He knew much better than I what lay ahead of us. If the line on the Aisne didn't hold, the hundred and fifty kilometers in front of Troyes would curl up in a flash under the German armor. Our best, perhaps our only, chance of being useful was to take ourselves off now, immediately, to a spot well behind the battle zone. Of all this he was painfully aware. But he couldn't tell me that he didn't believe the IVth Army could hold the Aisne. He could only advise me timidly to join forces with his very excellent hospital at Troyes. The *médecin chef*, he said, would be more than grateful for the help we could give him. Gosset said nothing. When I asked his opinion, his shoulders informed me that he wasn't interested—so when I turned the proposal down, Wörms gave it up. The army commander had ordered him to let me choose my own emplacement. I was determined to stay near the front, very well I could stay. If I would go with Captain Gosset to Rosnay I would find there a small château that might do. He pointed it out on the map. It was about fifty kilometers south of us on the main road from Châlons to Troyes.

Gosset and I were silent during the drive to St. Chéron. Actually he was no more eager than I to be attached to the hospital at Troyes. I learned this later from Dr. Bernard, but that didn't help matters at the moment. He held himself responsible for the safety of the unit and was furious that I had gone to see Réquin without consulting him. I don't blame him. I had behaved in a very foolish and highhanded manner.

I realize now how seriously he took his responsibility. Believing that defeat was certain, inclined by temperament to expect and even welcome calamity, he nevertheless was determined to do his duty, and discharge his obligation to the band of strange British women who must have maddened him by their optimism—and though I, for my part, hated his defeatism, I could not but admire his conduct of the unit during the harassing days that followed. He exerted himself to the utmost on our behalf and I came to count on him.

Indeed it is probable that if it had not been for Gosset and Dr. Guénin we would have been taken prisoner. For our unit was to be left very soon to look after itself and find its own way across France as best it could. We could never have done it if these two hadn't known the country intimately. That was to become a question of great importance. For once the

flood of refugees began to pour down the highroads of France south of Paris our one hope was to follow the little country roads, and avoid the congested towns with their milling throngs, their groaning bridges, their eternal traffic blocks. No, without Gosset and Guénin we couldn't have made it. We would have been lost.

But I anticipate. There was no thought of retreat in my mind that lovely ninth of June when I found the unit camping in the straggling village street of St. Chéron. What a gay dirty lot of gypsies they were. The trucks were all drawn up under the trees on one side of the street, the staff cars on the other; the orderlies, down at the bottom of the hill, were gathered round the rolling kitchen. Girls came running from cottages and barns to welcome us.

"It's *Madame la Générale*. Hi! everybody—here is *Madame la Générale*." Maria came at a gallop through the dust under the blazing sky. Barbara waved a spanner, wiped her nose with a black hand and grinned.

It was lunchtime. I was hustled up the hill to the village pub. Dorea and Dodo produced an excellent meal of bully beef, salad, cheese and a cool white wine. After lunch I was taken to inspect the billets. Fuhlroth, our invalid, had been installed in the one comfortable furnished room available. I found her lying in a large double bed in a blue crepe-de-Chine nightie with the window open on poppy fields that shimmered in the heat. Most of the drivers and nurses were sleeping in barns. Cynthia, Rosie and Pip Scott-Ellis had moved into an abandoned piggery. They had put up a sign over the broken door, "*Château du Porc*," and had turned the interior into an apartment not unlike the most modern of night clubs. Cynthia had pulled gay strips of cloth out of her tin box. Pip had drawn cartoons in charcoal on large squares of brown paper.

"But wait till you see your domain, boss."

Dorea and Maria conducted Maureen and me proudly to the derelict bungalow they had prepared for us. It had once been white. It had two rooms, a sitting room and a bedroom, and a veranda; four battered chairs, a table with a dirty crimson cloth, and two handsome brass candlesticks. Maureen, Dorea and Maria were to sleep in the sitting room. I was to have the small bedroom to myself. They had put up my camp bed, made me a dressing table out of a packing case and retrieved a jug and basin from one of the trucks.

"Isn't it grand, boss?"

"Grand."

We sat down on the veranda steps. There was a giant plane tree before



the front door. The village dozed in the heat. The sound of cannon was far away. I must go with Gosset presently to Rosnay to inspect the building where we proposed to set up the hospital. It was wonderful to be back—it was like coming home.

## CHAPTER VII

### I

HOW vividly they stand out in my memory, those villages of France where we camped for a single summer night. It is as if the dark torrent of the war surging round us made each one a lighted island, promising safety and rest. I must have clung to them with intense emotions of relief and gratitude. Indeed I have for them now the kind of feeling that wells up when I remember a village in America where I spent part of my childhood. St. Chéron was a ragged, dusty straggle of derelict cottages. I spent only one night there, we moved next day to Rosnay, but the memory of our grubby little bungalow with its dusty porch, its ragged plaster and the neglected privy behind a barn gives me a nostalgic pang. I recall with regret the soft tremulous night, the scent and sound of the rustling grasses outside my low window, the booming, like breakers on a beach, of distant guns.

None of us slept very well. There was no door in the doorway between the two rooms and I could hear Dorea and Maria rolling their big bodies in their camp beds, then Maria called:

"Are you asleep, boss?"

"No."

"Do you know what I want you to do?"

"What?"

"I want you to promise to take us all back to St. Jean after the war. I want to see Madame Nicolai again and Madame Bernard and old man Klein. God but it was fun behind those manure heaps. Do you remember the hot cross buns Klein made with the swastikas on them?"

"They weren't swastikas."

"I swear they were. Anyhow promise, boss, that you'll come back with us after the war."

"All right—but let's get some sleep."

The beds creaked again. One of the three began to snore gently.

We rolled out of bed about six. I can see Maureen moving across the street from the open-air kitchen with our coffee—such a pretty thing with

her pink cheeks and big brown eyes. The four of us sit down at the round table with its sordid crimson cloth. Our beds are rolled up, our bags packed. The two handsome brass candlesticks are standing proudly on the tawdry chimney piece. Dorea is pulling fat wads of thousand-franc notes from her pockets. We had had a great stroke of luck. The *intendance* had paid her our mess allowance for a month ahead the day we left St. Jean le Bassel! We were in funds.

"Twenty-five thousand francs, my dears—and the Dodge full of stores. We won't starve whatever happens."

The coffee in our tin mugs is strong and hot; Maria hands us chunks of bread from the big round loaf; Maureen has produced a pot of orange marmalade. We are hungry and happy. Yes, it is a happy breakfast party. Why not, we are friends, we like being together, the sense of danger is just strong enough to give a keen savor to life. I think that is the explanation of our high spirits; we are intensely alive.

It was June 10, the day chosen by Mussolini for his declaration of war and his attack on France. But I find no mention of the fact in my diary nor do I remember taking any notice of this special piece of bad news. Perhaps we didn't hear of it—perhaps hearing we gave it little thought. The news was so bad anyhow that no added calamity occurring at a distance made any great difference. We were in a spot, but the disasters accumulating beyond our small horizon didn't seem to concern us.

I wrote the following in my journal that afternoon sitting on the front porch of the bungalow we were about to abandon.

It is very still, very hot. The news is bad. Rumor that the French government has left Paris for Tours. I wonder about B. Impossible now to get in touch with him. Dorea has just come back in the Dodge from Vitry-le-François where we are supposed to get our provisions—says it's a shambles, and that she must fetch supplies in future between one and three in the morning. The loud explosions last night were the factory at St. Dizier going up in smoke. Not a cat left in this place. No living soul about save ourselves. The people in the café spent the night packing up. T. W. is under the Sunbeam across the street. I can see her feet sticking out.

Went with Gosset yesterday to Rosnay. He is very nervy but agrees that the little château has possibilities as a hospital. We move there this afternoon. Our orders last night were to go, clean up the place, but unpack nothing as we may have to move further south. The *Service de Santé* at Songy says over the phone, "We are dispersing our formations."

I wonder what that means. The communiqué has just announced, "On the Aisne between Château Porcin and Les Chênes *l'ennemi a été nettement bloqué.*" That is Réquin. The little chap has held them. There must be thousands of wounded but I have seen no ambulances on the road and we can do nothing. Was interrupted just then. A message came asking for the help of two surgeons in the military hospital in Châlons. Boutron, Guénin and Dr. Bernard have just set off. I go with Gosset and the convoy to Rosnay. Let us hope we can stay there and get to work. It's on the main road from Châlons, so there should be no difficulty about bringing the wounded.

We stayed two nights in Rosnay. It was to be our longest stop until we reached Arcachon on the twentieth. From the eleventh to the twentieth we were allowed to do one-night stands only. No sooner did we arrive in a place, find billets and unpack the kitchen than we were pushed out by the French Air Force or warned to move on. We seemed to be pursued by the air force and became exasperated with the heavy earth-bound men in their magnificent lorries who bore down on us and took our beds from under us when they should have been, so we thought, in the air. They had wings, hadn't they? we grumbled. We passed a number of airfields that provided the answer. The planes were there on the ground but no living soul was left to lift them. The fat pilots, they all seemed fat to me, preferred apparently to travel by road.

We despised these fat boys. We heaped scorn and abuse on them. But we didn't draw the obvious conclusion and admit to ourselves that the game was up. Gosset knew it, I think all our French officers realized it, I couldn't. Indeed I never gave up hope of settling down and getting to work. When Réquin's army was forced to retire from the Aisne I thought, "They will hold them on the Marne." When they withdrew from the Marne I said, "They will stand on the Loire." And each evening when we reached a new destination I would say to myself or Dorea, "This time we have surely come far enough. We will be safe here." And then the air force would arrive and order us off, or Gosset would go out reconnoitering and come back to say he had found a divisional *état-major* in retreat and been told we must be on the move by dawn. We got used to it. We learned to take it as a matter of course, but I never became resigned, never gave up hope of getting some sort of hospital going, never believed until the day Pétain asked for an armistice that the French would lay down their arms and accept defeat.

That is I think the reason why I was never really unhappy during

those harassing days. The plight of France soon became evident, but I didn't believe it was desperate. Not even after our heartbreaking night in the military hospital at Châlons. Nor when a few days later we rushed into the hideous flood of refugees pouring down the road from Paris to Lyons. The spectacle of a nation gone out of its mind with fear was to haunt me long after I got home. I would wake up in a cold sweat in my London bed to wonder what would happen if the Germans invaded England; and the faces of mad women would start out at me in the dark, women with insane eyes and streaming hair, at the wheels of cars full of children. I felt no pity for these at the time; only a cold fury at the thought that they were blocking the roads, hindering the movements of troops, doing their best to lose the war. That the war for France was already lost, that no troops were moving up to meet the enemy, didn't occur to me as a possibility.

I think that Dorea and Barbara were more alive to the desperate character of the situation than I. If they didn't say so, it was, I fancy, because there was no point in depressing me. There was nothing to be done save what we were doing, so why worry? If the worst happened, we had our cars. As long as the cars could keep going we were all right.

But what cars! There were vehicles in our motley collection that would have broken the hearts of most women. Not all were groggy. The Ford station wagons were bearing up well. Mrs. Ashton-Bennet's was a beautiful thing fit for a shop window in Piccadilly. The Sunbeam in T. W.'s hands wasn't giving too much trouble and the surviving Dodge (we had abandoned the other near Nancy) managed to trundle along with Dorea at the wheel and Didi, the cook, bouncing about inside with the stores. But the limousine Lady Hadfield had given me was far too elegant and fragile to take what was coming to it. Boddles' small Renault was as tricky as a wildcat, and Wilky's Hotchkiss was something out of a bad dream. It boiled on every hill. Looking back as we rounded a climbing bend, I would see it spouting brown water in the air like a boiling geyser.

But it was the Bedford that gave us our worst headaches. It carried over thirty French orderlies and if it died on us God alone knew how we would manage, for every vehicle was filled to capacity. I as a rule had Maureen and Mademoiselle Radenac and Dr. Bernard with me in the Renault, Rosie with Marie or T. W. in front; the nurses were divided among the station wagons; Gosset drove his two-seater with one of the sergeants beside him. There wasn't a seat to spare anywhere. In fact everything hung on the Bedford. If the Bedford broke down we would have to

abandon the orderlies, turn them loose in the road. But that was impossible. Gosset would never have done it. He would have jettisoned the whole of our material rather than leave his men behind—quite rightly. But if he did we were done for as an ambulance unit. Our very existence, as such, depended in fact on the Bedford. Barbara knew this well enough. No one had to tell her, no one could tell her anything about the Bedford. She knew the old creature as if she had made it. Hoary with age, it creaked and groaned and lurched along the roads. Gently, tenderly she persuaded it to go on. Again and again it seemed about to pass out, certainly it would have laid itself down and died a dozen times had she not nursed it like a decrepit and beloved invalid.

I don't know just why, during the days that followed when we took to the hills, the sight of our mixed convoy, so dilapidated in some parts, so handsome in others, winding its slow laborious way up hill and down dale through the beautiful country and the heartless sunshine, would give me a catch at the throat. I suppose it was the valiant girls at the wheels, the sense of their complete reliability and courageous good humor that twisted something in my left side, but the vehicles too seemed to be taking part in our crazy drama by doing their best. And I remember, perhaps because I was tired, looking back down a steep hill to watch with breathless suspense and misty eyes the old Bedford flounder like an elephant across a stream and begin the ascent.

It didn't die on us. Heaving and puffing with its thirty orderlies inside and Barbara on the box it made the grade. Even the Hotchkiss got there. We lost no more vehicles until the last night on the road, when I collected the twenty-five British women of 282 and made the final dash for Bordeaux.

## II

Lord Moran has many interesting things to say in his book, *The Anatomy of Courage*. My mind kept going back as I turned its pages to those days in France and I asked myself whether we were put to any real test of courage. For the Germans never caught up with us, we were always one jump ahead of them, the towns that we saw going up in flames were always towns we had left behind, what danger existed was always danger once removed and what courage was called for was moral, not physical. What it came to in the end was simply that we were running away very successfully and were having a grand time while we did so, but we were not proud of the fact, we were angry.

On the other hand none of the girls were what Lord Moran calls

yokels, those whose fearlessness has its source in a vacant mind. Most of them had enough imagination to picture to themselves vividly the dangers we managed to avoid and the horrors we missed seeing. So if courage is will power and moral courage counts for something, then my unit came through their test, such as it was, very respectably.

There was one, but only one, member of the unit who was afraid and showed it and shirked in the worst possible way—for she turned ugly and did her best to contaminate the others with her cowardice.

I had told the girls before we left England that no one need be ashamed of being afraid, that what mattered was doing one's job however scared one was. And I admire, naturally, the woman who controls her terror or shattered nerves even more than the one who is fearless. But this particular member of our company made little or no effort at self-control and I call her a coward because she seemed to want to break down the morale of the unit in order to have company for her ugly spirit. She didn't succeed. She remained unique, and she wouldn't be worth discussing, if she hadn't made such a striking contrast with the rest by her contemptible conduct.

I am aware that the nurses have dropped into the background of my narrative. This is inevitable. They played a leading part in our community while the hospital functioned, once we took to the road they became passengers. But the test of morale was for them the greater since all I required of them was to do what I asked and not fuss. What that cost some of them I didn't at the time fully realize. Though it was a part of my daily business to watch for signs of ill temper or nerves or any form of incipient panic, I hadn't time to talk to them much or get inside their minds. I had to judge from their faces, from the way they tackled their food, things of that sort. If anyone was off her feed—but they never were. We always stopped at noon, preferably in a village, requisitioning a café kitchen, and had a good hot meal. Didi would tumble out of the Dodge, Dodo would go foraging and come back with her cape full of fresh eggs or arms full of vegetables. Dorea would hand out the stores.

At one place we bought a sheep, at another half a pig. We had ample supplies of sugar, coffee and tea, bully beef and sardines. We did ourselves well at any rate for the first few days and our lunches were jolly affairs. If Guénin or Gosset looked back up the road with some apprehension, if some of the more nervy ones were eager to move on, no one remarked on the fact. There may have been squabbles. I don't pretend that our feminine staff was a group of angels. T. W. cursed quite a bit under her breath, Maria growled, Josie was usually carsick, Boddles was

always losing something. But I remember walking back down the road two or three times during the day when the convoy was resting to look into each car to see how the passengers were faring and I carry with me a picture of the station wagons each filled with cheerful tousled heads, rumpled capes, paper bags of sweets, crumbs, bits of chocolate. And so, to repeat again, though we were never put to any serious test, I feel that the unit showed up remarkably well. The girls proved, and this is the interesting thing, that they had enough courage to meet what was asked of them and a lot to spare. Indeed I knew from the way they behaved that if anything really frightening did happen, they would not let me down.

Rosnay was an enchanting village of small whitewashed houses with gay flowers at their doors. It seemed to be spellbound. For it lay straight in the path of the enemy on the main road south from Châlons and it was utterly peaceful. Old women sat in their doorways knitting, children played in the sun, family parties were drinking coffee in the gardens, a river flowed.

The blue-eyed, sunburned mayor had been warned of our coming and had made preparations. He welcomed us courteously and showed us into a series of delightful old-fashioned cottage bedrooms with waxed floors, old oak cupboards and snowy beds. There was room in the cottages for all the nurses and some of the drivers. Maureen and I were lodged in the manor down by the river. Eight of the M.T.C. moved into the attic above us—not a comfortable billet for the attic was bare. But the atmosphere of the village was so pleasant, normal and friendly, that everyone was delighted. Dorea and Dodo set to work at once unpacking our pretty green china in the village hall that was to be our mess, while Gosset, Maureen, Wright and I went over to the château.

We were told not to unload our material, but Gosset agreed with me that we might as well plan out the building, and we were counting up the number of beds we could put into each of the empty rooms when the second S.O.S. came from Châlons. Mademoiselle Radenac and six orderlies were wanted urgently, also a supply of surgical dressings, bandages and candles.

“Why candles, Gosset?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Electricity cut off, I suppose.”

I would go with them, I said.

Gosset objected. It was a fifty-mile run. If Châlons were threatened, the fewer people left there to be evacuated the better. My place was here with the nurses. Suppose we had to move quickly? I promised that I



wouldn't stay. I would see how our *équipe* was getting on, then come back.

We had parked the big trucks in the yard of the château. I sent Maureen to collect Mademoiselle Radenac, Mrs. Ashton-Bennet and her Ford with Pellew as second driver, while Gosset, Nancy Wright and I hauled the needed supplies out of the trucks. Nancy had packed all the operating-room stuff herself in wicker baskets and knew just where to find the dressings and bandages. But candles? We opened box after box—at last they were discovered under one of the drivers' seats.

### III

We must have left about seven. The six orderlies were pleased to be going. Mademoiselle Radenac sat beside me as still as a mouse. Impossible to tell what she was thinking or feeling. She didn't look any more scared than usual. Such a strange little creature. She would go to the stake with those scared eyes and never a murmur from that mute tight little mouth. I had tried to be kind and would make an effort to talk to her but she would answer in monosyllables. Where did she come from? What sort of a home did she have to go back to? Had she a mother, a father, a sweetheart? No, not a sweetheart. She was a lay nun. But who could tell? Who could say that that bulging forehead and meager form might not have been pleasing to a man who was perhaps even now lying dead in some no man's land? Or perhaps he was in an office somewhere scribbling with one of those spluttering pens, filling up a few hundred of the innumerable forms that cluttered up the French bureaucracy and dreaming of a tiny apartment full of stiff shiny furniture where he would one day install Mademoiselle Radenac.

I would try to picture it, try to understand the little enigma sitting beside me, then I would forget all about her. She was so silent and so withdrawn it was as if she weren't there. Today it was like that. She had been sent for. She was going to do her duty. She would do it admirably. If she were frightened no one would ever know. She was probably a heroine. I would deposit her in Châlons. If she didn't come back it would be as if she had never existed.

Such a beautiful evening. A golden light was spread over the fields as we sped north, but when we drove into the yard of the military hospital in Châlons it seemed to be growing dark. It hadn't taken us two hours from Rosnay but I see the dreadful scene that greeted us as shrouded in twilight. All the vast yard in front of the dark building was covered with wounded on stretchers. I didn't count them. There must have been some-

thing near a thousand, and the ambulances were still coming in. And in the center of the field of the dying, two men were standing waving helpless arms in exhausted, discouraged gesticulation. Their clothes had once been white. They wore surgeons' blouses and aprons; but their aprons were scarlet, their sleeves were splashed with the same color, even their hands were red with blood. They paid us no attention as we picked our way through the close-packed stretchers toward the distant yawning door, but as I passed close to one of them, I saw his bleared eyes and knew that he was drunk, either with wine or with blood and sweat and horror.

It was almost quite dark in the long porch that spread across the front of the building, and that too was packed with shadowy bundles on stretchers. Inside, it was black night. I stumbled on one body, stepped aside, stumbled again. But the forms I had bumped into so rudely didn't curse me or complain, they were silent. Perhaps they were dead, perhaps not yet dead, but already far away from this dreadful place—hovering a moment over their distant homes before they slipped away forever.

All down the long corridor the dead and the dying and those who need not have died lay silent in the dark. We seemed to walk for miles down those corridors. We turned left, then right, and the motionless silent procession passed with us, unending. And there was almost no sound. Almost none of the bundles moaned or whimpered.

We found our doctors at last in a small room that must have once been an office. The last light from the setting sun came in at the window. They crowded round us like distracted children crying, "We have no light. We have no water. The light in the town has failed, the water has been cut off. There is no sterilizer. We are expected to operate."

I tried to soothe them. Our orderlies had followed Radenac and me with the baskets.

"Here are candles," I said. "And here are two big baskets of sterilized dressings."

"But there is no one to separate the dead from the dying. How can one tell? They are all so quiet. We don't know where to begin."

"We must begin," I said to Dr. Bernard, who was more composed than the others, "with those who are lying outside this door. Are there no nurses?"

"None. They have all gone save two *Soeurs de Charité*."

"Then you and I will separate the dead from the dying in this corridor. That is the first thing."

Mademoiselle Radenac was already busy unpacking the baskets, sending orderlies with pails to fetch water.

I went out into the dark corridor with Dr. Bernard. We lit candles and

carried them from one form to another—lifting a blanket to look at a face, fumble for a pulse. Many were dead. The smell was very bad. Our orderlies carried the dead to the far end of the corridor and laid them down in the darkness.

Mademoiselle Radenac came out of the operating room to say that they would need more supplies. I said I would go for them. I think I left about midnight. Guénin and Boutron were operating. The ambulances were still rolling in as I picked my way with Dr. Bernard's help among the stretchers to the Ford where Pellew and Mrs. Ashton-Bennet were waiting. Dr. Bernard gave me the list Radenac had prepared. I said I would collect Wright with the things and bring her back.

But I did not return to Châlons. We lost our way, dawn was breaking when we reached Rosnay. Our team had telephoned from Châlons by the time we were ready to take the road again, to say that they were ordered to leave as the hospital was closing down.

They left Châlons at eight, having worked all night and done twenty or more big operations. The Germans, as we learned later, were in the town at noon. I don't know what happened to the wounded. None came our way. We awaited them. Orders or no orders, Gosset would have taken them in but the ambulances didn't come. Neither that day nor the next in Guigny and Amance, nor the day after at Ancy-le-Franc. Not until we were swept into the torrential flood of refugees did we see a single ambulance; and then, those we saw carried, not wounded, but blowzy women and drunken troops who had thrown away their arms and waved bottles at us as they passed.

## CHAPTER VIII

### I

WE WERE furious when Gosset told us that night at supper that the air force was turning us out of Rosnay. A squadron was coming, he said, to occupy not only the château but all our billets. We must leave early next morning.

"Then we are not to be allowed to set up the hospital?"

"No. But we are ordered to set up a *poste d'embarquement* at the railway station at Guigny." The *Service de Santé* proposed to use Guigny station instead of Vitry-le-François as the latter was in flames. The line, it appeared, had broken.

"Where is Guigny?"

"To the north off the main road—just south of Vitry. There's a railway siding—a branch line. Miss Wright, will you come with me, please, we must make a selection of instruments."

"Just a moment, Gosset. How many nurses will you want at Guigny?"

"Six. I'm taking one surgical team."

"And what happens to the rest? Where do they go?"

"They must wait until Bernard can find a new cantonment."

"Where shall they wait?"

"Here in the road in their vehicles."

"What time must we vacate our billets?"

"Before seven. If you will come, Miss Wright." He strode out. Wright followed him. Dorea gave a snort. "Sounds jolly." Barbara said, "Drat that air force." I looked down the long table that Dodo had set out so nicely. The evening sun glinted on our pretty green china, lighted up a double row of mutinous faces.

"A pity," I said, "but there it is. We've got to pack up, and it won't be very pleasant, I fancy, at Guigny. You heard what Gosset said—so if any nurses care to volunteer—"

The response was immediate. The scowls vanished. All the nurses were ready and eager to go to Guigny. There was a general pushing back of

chairs. Cynthia said, "Come on, Barbara, let's have a last swim in the river." Dorea and Dodo began to clear the table.

The village street was quiet. The flowers in the cottage gardens glowed in the evening light. How peaceful it was. Didn't the mayor know that the line had broken? that even now the Germans—But Josie Pearce was at my elbow waving distracted hands. "How awful," she cried. "What am I to do? Oh dear, oh dear, what shall I do?"

"What on earth is the matter, Josie?"

"Your laundry," she cried. "I gave it to a woman to wash."

It was true; she had come to my room in the morning to suggest that as we would probably stay at Rosnay some time it might be a good idea to get some of my white dresses and aprons laundered. I remembered now that she had gone off with a bundle of my things.

"Well, you'll have to get it back, that's all."

"But I can't remember the woman's name," she wailed, "or which house she lived in." For a moment she stood there wringing her hands, then suddenly her face lighted up, and shouting, "I know, the town crier," she bolted down the street.

I was settling the details for the next day with Jean when I heard the town crier's bell, and there he was coming down the street with Josie following, and he was ringing the bell and crying aloud:

*"Qui a le linge sale de Madame la Générale? Qui a le linge sale de Madame la Générale?"*

And sure enough he was only a few houses away when a woman popped out of her cottage door calling, "I have the dirty linen of *Madame la Générale*," and Josie returned triumphant, a bundle of damp white aprons under her arm.

The notes in my diary become from now on very brief. Under the twelfth of June I find this:

Left Rosnay yesterday at 7 A.M. with six nurses for Guigny railway station. Nothing at Guigny but an empty cheese factory by the railway siding. Installed operating room in manager's office—quite o.k. except for strong smell of cheese, then went off with Bernard to find new billets. Gosset's idea to bring all the unit including heavy lorries to Guigny. This impossible as there were no billets anywhere. Lucky we didn't as the roads in the afternoon were full of troops in retreat. And when we tried to get on to the *Service de Santé* at Songy there was no answer. They had decamped. Réquin too had moved his H.Q. God knows where. As we could get in touch with no one we have come on to Amance.

The entry may not seem very clear. Neither, as I remember, did the situation.

Guigny is enveloped in the dream atmosphere that came rolling up every now and then during those days like a fog to obscure the landscape and distort the most familiar objects. The place was a pocket, hemmed in by trees. There was nothing there save the hideous empty cheese factory and abandoned railway siding. But ugly little towns crowded each other, so I seem to recall, beyond the trees and out of them ran roads, fluid with flying troops, and the sky arching over the place resounded like a gong.

A desolate uncanny place pervaded by the smell of cheese and an unnatural, precarious stillness. I see Gosset striding about the ugly empty building like an irate giant; Guénin's burly form pacing the station platform like a bear in a cage; Le Canouet drooping on a discarded packing case, his nice brown eyes wistfully staring at the screen of foliage that shut us in.

I must have arrived about eight with the nurses. I spent a part of the morning with them unpacking the surgical baskets, then went off with Bernard to look for billets. But the houses were either locked and barred or crowded with refugees. I remember going round and round with Bernard while he knocked at the doors of *mairies*, *sous préfectures* and *cafés*. It was useless—and as the day wore on the purpose of our search became more and more senseless. For the atmosphere of the sordid district was changing rapidly. The temperature was rising, the pulse quickening, with the increasing thunder of guns that sounded much nearer than in the early morning. To bring all our staff and equipment north when the enemy was very evidently advancing south seemed to us madness by the middle of the afternoon, and we went back to the cheese factory and said so. Nothing had happened there. The nurses were waiting, the doctors were waiting, the orderlies were waiting. Nancy had made an excellent job of the improvised operating room, operating table, instruments, drums of sterilized dressing, surgeons' gowns; everything was ready. But there was no sign of an ambulance nor of any living human being save ourselves.

Dr. Bernard and I tried to convince Gosset of the folly of remaining in the place. His orders he insisted were to open a dressing station at Guigny. He had opened it. It must remain open until further orders. In the end he went off in his two-seater to see for himself what was going on and came back very excited. He had met the —th *en déroute*. The troops were streaming past a few hundred yards from the cheese factory. He had tried to get the *Service de Santé* by phone and had failed. Songy didn't answer.

"Well then—" Bernard lifted a grizzled eyebrow.

"Well what?" Gosset waved his arms. Orders were orders until they were countermanded.

"But if there is no work? If we have nothing to do?"

At last he agreed to send the nurses back and move the bulk of the unit south to Amance, but the surgical team must stay. So I collected the nurses, we said good-by to Guénin and Le Canouet, and made off.

I didn't like it, neither did Gosset. I think we both felt, from that evening on, very nervous about dividing the unit. For we worked out that night a way of keeping in touch if we got separated. If any part of the unit had to go ahead of any other part, it must never do so without picking out a rendezvous on the map and it must leave word at the *Bureau de la Place* of the rendezvous exactly where it had gone, with the military number of the road it was following. This was most important as we found later to our cost. Failing the *Bureau de la Place*, the advance party would leave an orderly at the *préfecture*, failing the *préfecture*, at the *mairie*.

We had left Guénin and Le Canouet very disconsolate on the deserted railway platform. They sat there uselessly, through the long summer evening. Towns were going up in flames to right and left of them, regiments were streaming past in flight along the main roads from Châlons. Nothing happened in Guigny to break the uncanny quiet. They waited all night. No ambulance arrived. No train steamed up to the siding. The battle was raging beyond the trees. They could watch the flames of burning Vitry, listen to the guns. They had nothing else to do. When Gosset and I turned up early next morning we found them sitting where we had left them. They had had one patient during the night. A child of three who had been hit by a bomb and had died in Le Canouet's arms.

Gosset was in a dilemma. He had got in touch at last with the *Service de Santé* and the *Service de Santé* had insisted, blindly, on our maintaining our *équipe* at Guigny, but we had come on other regiments in flight on our way up to Guigny that morning and General de Lattre himself had passed us like a flash making south in his car. Now to find Guigny useless was too much. He ordered his team back to Amance.

They rejoined just in time to move on. For once again we were obliged to pack up and make off. But this time it was a couple of military police on motorcycles who warned us. The *Service de Santé* was silent. It sent us no orders—no message of any kind. And when Gosset went to look for them at noon in the place where he had found them early that morning, they were gone.

## II

We were at lunch in a café by the road when the two police came dashing past on their motorcycles. Luckily, they saw us and stopped. They had come,

they said, from Vitry. The Germans had overrun the place and were advancing rapidly down the road. We'd better waste no time.

Move we must and that quickly; the general direction was not in dispute, southward and away from the Germans, but what road should we take and what place should we make for?

I think that it must have been at this point in our pilgrimage that Gosset gave up any idea of getting to work again. He didn't take me into his confidence, but when he spread out the road map on the café table and began discussing possible itineraries with Guénin, there was no further mention of suitable quarters for a hospital. It was now merely a question of getting as far as possible before dark and of selecting a place where we might find petrol for our thirty vehicles as well as billets for our hundred souls.

I had sent the girls scurrying from the lunch table to their billets to pack up their belongings and, when I had seen to my own things, went off down the lane where the cars were waiting. The big Renault trucks were garaged in a shed and there I found Gosset, inside one of them, astride great bundles of bedding in the act of throwing out our nice hospital pillows.

"What on earth are you doing that for, Gosset?"

"To lighten the trucks," he shouted. "We must lighten the trucks. Every one of the trucks is overloaded."

He was very excited and went on flinging down pillows pell-mell on to the dirty floor. Maureen was almost in tears. Dorea was watching with an inscrutable expression. Then suddenly with the work half done he made off calling for Dr. Bernard, calling to Miss Napier to assemble her cars, calling back over his shoulder to me that we must be on the road in half an hour and to see to it that all "*ces dames*" were ready.

When he had gone I said, "Now we put the pillows back where they belong." And we did—not only that day but the next, for it happened again. Dorea declares that Gosset threw them out each day and that each day we put them back, but I cannot swear to that.

I saw his point about lightening the lorries, it was vital to keep our vehicles going; and I was prepared to sacrifice all unessentials—in particular such belongings as gramophones, china and books. I think it was at Amance that we abandoned our elegant dinner service from Sarreguemines, but pillows—no. "What," asked Dorea, "is a hospital without pillows?" Barbara said, "Why worry about the trucks anyhow? They are new. But what about my old girl?" And she dived again into the Bedford's bonnet. T. W. was in the road on her back as usual under the Sunbeam. "Just hand me a bit of soap, will you. There's a leak in my petrol tank." Rosie, managing in her



mysterious way to look fragile and elegant in a pair of filthy khaki trousers, was testing the oil in the Renault.

"All right, Rosie?"

"Fine." A smile lit up her very young, very serious, very beautiful face.

"We're off in a few minutes."

"I'm ready."

But Boddles was wailing. "T. W., do come; my starter's jammed. T. W., do come and help. I don't know what to do."

I went back to the café. Guénin and Bernard were still poring over the map. I sat down beside them and lit a cigarette. Staring at the white dusty road I had a sensation of blindness. I had no idea of where the road led. There appeared to be no reason to fix on any particular place for our next halt. We had lost touch with the IVth Army. It was in retreat somewhere beyond the sunny fields, green thickets and wild rose hedges, but where? The road was empty. Were we already left behind? It occurred to me that if we couldn't find the *Service de Santé* it must be equally true that they couldn't find us. This meant that there was no one now to give us orders. There was in fact no one who had the faintest idea where we were. We were on our own and must look after ourselves.

Then I heard Guénin say, "Tonnerre! We can get petrol at Tonnerre and can just make it by nightfall." And I had a sudden lift of the heart for I knew Tonnerre. B. and I had stayed with the Duc de Clermont-Tonnerre some years before at the Château of Ancy-le-Franc. It was a huge Renaissance palace, only a few miles from the town. It could easily accommodate our hundred bodies.

"But that's wonderful," I cried. "I had no idea we were anywhere near Tonnerre. The Duc de Clermont-Tonnerre is a friend. Even if he isn't at Ancy-le-Franc we are sure to find someone."

So it was arranged that I should go ahead in the Renault with Maureen, Guénin and Bernard (T. W. and Rosie on the box), make arrangements with the duke or his steward to billet us for the night, and that Gosset would follow with the convoy.

It was a lovely drive. To have come suddenly within range of a familiar place and a friend out of the far distant world of peace was so like a miracle that I chattered away to Guénin and Bernard about the delightful week I had spent in the great château, as if all our troubles were over. It was built in the form of a square. All our vehicles could drive through into the stable yard. The orderlies would be on velvet in the outbuildings.

Alas—we realized as we approached the proud façade that others had got there before us. The park was full of troops. Through the stable arch

we saw that the yard was crowded with guns. The great wide steps were swarming with officers and there was a sentinel at the door.

T. W. swept round the gravel with a flourish and brought our dusty Renault to a stop. The doctors hung back. "Do you think it's any use? Do you think you'd better?"

I was rather frightened but I got out and went up the front steps. They seemed as formidable as the steps of St. Peter's. A group of officers stared. A young lieutenant touched his cap.

"I am looking," I said, "for the Duc de Clermont-Tonnerre. Can you help me?"

"I'm afraid he isn't here, madame."

"Then I would like to speak to his steward or one of his servants."

The young officer hesitated uncomfortably. "I don't know, madame, if it is possible."

"But surely it is possible. I am Madame la Générale Spears, a friend of the duke's. There must be someone."

"I will inquire, *Madame la Générale*."

The lieutenant disappeared. I waited. Officers came hurrying up the steps; others came hurrying out of the great door. They all seemed very surprised to see me standing there. I was hot, tired, disappointed and acutely aware that my white apron and coif were rumpled and dirty.

At last a very tall figure appeared, all in black, with silvery hair. It was one of the duke's servants. I didn't know him but he bowed with ceremony and informed me that the duke was not at home, he was in the south!

"Who then is here?" I asked.

"The *état-major* is here, madame."

"What *état-major*?"

He lifted his long hands.

I turned to the young officer. "Tell me, please, what *état-major* is it?"

"The *état-major* of the Army Group of General Huntzinger."

"Then if you will be so kind as to take me to the general, I would like to speak to him."

"But madame," the young man hesitated miserably. "Isn't it rather risky?"

I smiled. It seemed a funny word to use, "Risky? Oh no. I am in trouble. I am certain that General Huntzinger will help me. Be so good as to show me the way."

What could the poor boy do? Between chivalry and fear of his general he was distracted but he led me into the château up a flight of broad stairs, down a long corridor, pointed to a door and fled.

I knocked. A voice said, "*Entrez*," rather angrily. I opened the door and walked into a crowd of generals. Three stars, four stars, five stars. I'd never seen so many stars together in such a small space. Nor so many peering eyes. My head swam. Everything blacked out save a circle of astonished eyes, staring as if at a ghost. Then a small, spare, sandy-haired man stepped forward and I said:

"I am Madame Spears, and I have lost my army."

"What army is that, madame?"

"The IVth Army."

The general looked at me gravely in silence.

"I am retreating," I went on hurriedly, "with my hospital. We were looking for a place where we could camp for the night. I came here because I had stayed here in peacetime, and hoped the duke would take us in. But I see you have got here before me."

I think the general smiled. I believe he said something about being sorry. Then he was silent again. He seemed not to know what to do with me. I don't wonder. I had walked into a military conference of desperate urgency. I didn't know this. I only knew that there was no room for us in the great house that had once been so hospitable and that I was miserable and I stood there miserably a moment looking into Huntzinger's weary eyes—for it was he—then was turning away when I heard a voice so far above my head that it seemed to come from the painted ceiling, and it said in excellent English, "Have you had tea, Mrs. Spears?" and I laughed.

"No. I haven't had tea and I don't think I had much lunch. We were interrupted at lunch."

"Then come with me and have tea in the next room and while you are having tea, the general will find you another château for the night."

"I have friends with me. Three ladies and two officers, could they have tea too?"

"But of course."

So General Huntzinger's A.D.C. took me next door into a room hung with tapestries; I remembered it well; it was the small drawing room where we used to sit after dinner. And presently Maureen arrived with the two doctors. (T. W. and Rosie stayed with the car.) Then a soldier servant appeared with a large tray carrying a silver tea service, pretty porcelain cups, a plate of thinly sliced bread and butter, and another of dried figs. It was wonderful.

General Huntzinger came in when we had finished tea. His A.D.C. must have taken Maureen and the doctors away so that he could talk to me privately, for I recall that we were alone. He didn't say much. I remember

him as a dry, colorless man, very courteous, obviously very worried, and more than a little disgusted with the way his armies were behaving, but the impression he made on me was not that of a great military commander capable of snatching victory from defeat or inspiring confidence in despairing men.

He sat down crossing one thin knee over the other and looked at me in his grave searching way. I told him how we had lost touch with the IVth Army.

I said, "There seems to be a certain amount of confusion in our sector."

"There is a great deal of confusion, madame, a great deal too much." He frowned. "But you are no longer in the IVth Army sector."

"Oh."

"Do you want to rejoin the IVth Army?"

"But of course. We belong to it. We've been with General Réquin since the beginning."

"Then you should go to Auxerre, tomorrow; you will find General Réquin near Auxerre. I advise you to go yourself and consult with him. In the meantime I have requisitioned a château in the neighborhood for you. The owners are very disagreeable people, but you may tell them from me that if they make difficulties they will be evicted."

He rose. I did the same. "Is there anything more," he asked, "that I can do for you?"

"Yes—if you will be so kind."

"What is it, madame?"

"If you could send a message to my husband saying that we are all safe and well. He is somewhere with the French government. He is with Paul Reynaud. Do you think you could get him the message?"

"He shall have it, madame."

He had lifted a grizzled eyebrow when I had said we were safe, but now he smiled his dry smile again. I thanked him and left. I was to see him once more, but not to speak to.

His A.D.C. took me down to the car. A dispatch rider was waiting to show us the way.

"Don't stand any nonsense from those people," the captain said cheerfully, "and don't worry. We'll send your *médecin chef* on when he turns up and if anything happens to make it impossible for you to rejoin General Réquin we'll get in touch with you."

I do not know what the French history books will have to say about General Huntzinger beyond the fact that he was one of the signatories of the Franco-German armistice at Compiègne and became Minister of War

to the Vichy government. A French writer has quoted him as making a very interesting statement at Compiègne. He is reported to have said as he signed the capitulation of France, "If Britain is not brought to her knees in three months, we are the greatest criminals in history." But I don't suppose the words will be engraved on the portals of the Third Republic and I wonder how many of the schoolboys of France will be told in the lyceés how General Huntzinger ordered the French forces in Syria in 1941 not to interfere with the German planes arriving on their airdromes, but to resist any Allied troops that might venture to cross into Syria from Palestine. I was not clairvoyant when I met Huntzinger. I didn't foresee that he would one day become an enemy of Great Britain, nor that the French troops who carried out his orders in '41 would some day fill my new hospital with British and Free French casualties. I saw nothing to worry me in his grim old eyes. He had been kind and I was grateful. He could help me, and I proposed to avail myself of his help. But I was by no means convinced of being in any desperate need. My interview hadn't roused in me any frightening suspicions of the true state of affairs. On the contrary—I came down the great château steps walking on air. General Huntzinger had found us lodgings for the night, all was well for the moment—and the moment was all that mattered. The war, to be sure, was being lost for France just up the road, beyond that belt of trees, across that bridge, or if you prefer, in the room I had just left with the painted ceiling, but we were so preoccupied with the immediate problems of shelter for the night and food that we didn't notice it.

## III

The château to which General Huntzinger sent us was a fine modern house of white stone in a thickly wooded park behind high wrought-iron gates. It had some twenty bedrooms, luxuriously furnished, and was quite horrible. The owner flatly refused at first to let us in, when Guénin delivered the general's message his wife had hysterics, and when Gosset at last arrived alone he was in a towering rage. He had left our convoy in the road the far side of Tonnerre and refused to send for it. Gosset refused to stay, I refused to budge. I had been wrong at Songy about not going to Troyes, but this time I knew I was right. Our only hope now of getting any advice or information was from Huntzinger's headquarters. We had had a great stroke of luck in falling on Huntzinger and whatever Gosset said I was determined to do what the general told me. I would go to Auxerre next day and if our luck held would find Réquin. It wasn't far, we could go and be back early before dark. I don't know why Gosset was so against staying in the

horrid house. I can't explain it even now, but I won. Guénin took T. W. back to fetch the convoy, Bernard took Gosset off into the park, and Maureen and I fell into a stupor on a pair of elegant twin beds.

The experiences of the following day have blacked out the rest of that unwelcome sojourn. War or no war, it isn't pleasant to be forced to sleep in a house that hates you. I left it early next morning and never saw our unwilling host and hostess again. Dorea tells me that Thompson seemed to go daft and danced very strangely among the trees that evening by moonlight and that Didi gave them some quite detestable egg whisks for lunch next day, but I was well away on the road to Auxerre by that time. It was the thirteenth of June. The French government had moved to Tours. The Germans were to enter Paris next day and Weygand was even then discussing with his staff the advisability of ordering a cease fire. But of this we knew and suspected nothing. Even when suddenly we came up against the flood of refugees at Auxerre we failed to understand the meaning of that horrifying human torrent.

It was crawling south. It filled the great Paris-Lyons road with a solid moving mass of machinery. We had approached Auxerre from the east, came up against the torrent and were stopped. We had to cross, but how? The cars all heading one way were six abreast, they were in frantic haste but moved inch by inch and there wasn't an inch to spare between the bumpers of those in front and the bonnets of those behind. Handsome limousines with smart chauffeurs in livery; trucks piled high with household belongings; women and children on top; tiny Citroëns, decrepit Fords, mattresses on roofs, pots and kettles swinging from running boards and bonnets, prams, bird cages; the sun poured down, the dust and petrol fumes enveloped the monstrous thing in a yellow mist and through it one caught sight of frenzied women's faces distorted by fear into the likeness of fiends; while along the edges, on the grass in and out among the trees moved two streams of bicycles. Healthy young men, boys of eighteen with ruddy faces, sleek youths of twenty or so with open sports shirts and smooth hair, where had they come from, why weren't they going the other way, footing it with knapsacks on their backs and rifles in their hands?

We had left Ancy-le-Franc in two cars; it was more prudent in case of a breakdown. T. W. driving me in my Renault with Rosie beside her, Boddles driving Boutron in her small one. We waited on the edge of the horrifying river half an hour, then gave it up and turned south. We might find it possible, T. W. thought, to cross lower down. We managed it in the end and wormed our way into Auxerre only to be blocked again on the bridge. The bridge was even worse than the road. The stream of cars in the road

did move forward very slowly, in jerks, with long halts. On the bridge nothing could move at all. We sat wedged in on four sides for an hour and a half. Rosie has reminded me that an airplane appeared overhead while we were on the bridge and that, at the sight of it, half the people abandoned their cars, leaving them driverless, to further obstruct the traffic. Finally in despair Bernard and I decided to get out and walk up the hill to the barracks. We would ask for Réquin and wait for the cars.

It was a miracle that they were able to rejoin us. We had toiled up the street through the broiling sun to the caserne, pushed our way through a scene of incredible confusion into the commandant's office and been told that Réquin was in a village ten kilometers to the north when some German planes decided to bomb the place. At the same moment I saw our two cars in the courtyard, and T. W., Rosie and Boddles and Boutron standing quietly, their backs against a brick wall. We joined them. I don't know how many bombs were dropped nor how much damage they did. None fell actually in the barrack square nor I believe on the bridge. The Germans were perhaps merely having a bit of fun with the refugees. They no longer bothered to machine-gun civilians as they had done in the north. They had achieved their purpose of spreading panic and blocking the movement of troops; it wasn't necessary.

We found Réquin at last in a godforsaken little house in a pocket among the hills. He was asleep when we arrived. It was Lecomte who came to the door. The general, he explained with a suggestion of his old smile, hadn't slept for several nights. They had been on the move. But he would call him—most certainly he would call him. The general would never forgive him if he allowed me to go away. And presently Réquin came down to the prim dreary parlor, all brown plush and mahogany. It was a curious, sad little interview. For he had nothing to say. There was nothing he could say, no advice he could give me. I had thought, I said, of making for a village called V——. There was a house there belonging to relatives of ours. Did he think that a good idea? It was to the south not far from Avallon. Once more he spread a map on the table. "Yes," he said, "V—— should do very well," but he spoke without conviction, and looking into his white exhausted face my heart sank—for I knew that it was no good. He couldn't help us now nor even tell us what to do.

It had been my purpose, I remembered, to rejoin the IVth Army. But where was it? Where was Colonel Dumas? Where were the rest of the staff? There was no one about as we drove away. Réquin appeared to be alone with Lecomte; lost like ourselves.

We didn't go back the way we had come. We made a wide detour to avoid Auxerre, crossed the unabated torrent of refugees ten miles farther south, missed our road in the dark and reached our château at ten o'clock at night to find the iron gates of the park locked and no sight or sound of any living soul within.

They had gone. The unit had moved on leaving us behind. Why? What had happened? What were we to do?



## CHAPTER IX

### I

IT WAS Boddles who found the white envelope tucked into the lock of the gate. She brought it to me and held her torch over the paper while I read. It was from Gosset. General Huntzinger had sent them word that they must move on that afternoon. They had waited for us as long as possible—they were going to the village of C——, seventy kilometers south and west, on Route X. We were to follow.

Bernard and Boutron had some difficulty in finding Route X on the map; it wasn't a main road. But at last they found C——. T. W. and Rosie waited in silence. I took a last look at the high locked gates of the unfriendly château, the dense shadow of the deserted park beyond. There was nothing for it. We must push on. We turned and began to nose our way through the dark.

I don't know how the girls managed to drive that night or on any of the nights that followed. We had no lights, not even side lights. Any vehicle showing a light of any kind would have been attacked by infuriated drivers from the military convoys that were on the move under the cover of darkness. No one did anything so foolish. It needed no military police to enforce the rule. The French Air Force had long since abandoned the open sky to the enemy and the enemy as everyone knew was creating havoc on the roads.

Rosie tells me that it wasn't as difficult nor as frightening as driving at night in the desert. There were the trees, she says, they helped. You could see the sky ahead between the two dark masses, and there were no mines. You didn't expect if you got off the road to be blown up—and if you drove very slowly you could see the shape of a truck before you bumped into it.

We did, I think, about ten miles an hour. From my place at the back I could see almost nothing. A deeper darkness, a shadowy bulk looming ahead, vague outlines of shapes to the side of the road. Many convoys were drawn up under the trees. There was the sound of subdued voices. The dark was populated by invisible troops. It was impossible to relax, to stop trying to see, to close one's eyes that were of no use—they ached but refused to be closed. We pushed slowly on. The road was narrow and winding. Now and

then at a fork or a crossroads Dr. Bernard would get out and try to read the signposts by the light of his torch. Alas, there were two villages in the region called by the same name and we chose to make for the wrong one. We were still creeping toward it at midnight when what looked like a procession of elephants loomed up beside us. It was our own heavy convoy. T. W. recognized the five-ton Renaults in the dark and stopped. I got out. There was a glimmer of light up the road. I called, "Are you 282?" And a voice quite near me answered out of the night, "Hello, May. You are on the wrong road."

It was Barbara. The heavy trucks had lost their way and were turning back when the Bedford had broken down. Barbara was repairing it in the dark. The *sergent chef* in charge of the heavy convoy came to me next day to tell me, "Miss Graham—she has genius. In twenty minutes, in complete darkness she did a job that might have taken me anything up to an hour in daylight."

We reached the proper C—— sometime after one in the morning. Gosset had posted one of our orderlies in the road to conduct us to the château. We stepped out of the night into a brilliantly lighted salon full of strange, sleek ladies and gentlemen. It seemed that they were friends of Dr. Guénin's. It appeared that one of the ladies, a very handsome blonde in pale blue with scarlet fingernails was Guénin's wife, that the stout gentleman in a dinner jacket was a junior Minister, that they were all refugees from Paris and that the Germans were already in possession of the capital.

The lady of the house was very kind. I've no idea what she looked like. She has no face nor body in my memory. I don't remember her name, nor the names of her friends. Even the Minister who did me such a good turn next morning is a man without identity. I was dazed and I see that pretty lighted salon with its elegant Louis XV furniture now as I did then—through a mist. Madame Guénin is the only one of the group who stands out clearly. Her opulent beauty, her hard waved hair, her white hands so exquisitely manicured made me shockingly aware of my own dilapidated condition. Rosie was wilting on her gilded chair, Boddles was gray, even T. W.'s solid shoulders sagged. Barbara was black as a chimney sweep.

Our hostess led the way to the dining room. We sat down to a supper of bread and butter and white wine. Gosset stalked up and down while we ate. The others were billeted, he explained, in the village, but a camp bed had been put up for me in the billiard room. We would move on next day if we could get petrol. That was doubtful. We were entitled to petrol as a military formation but with every civilian car in the country on the road, the army was starved for petrol. Our tanks were dry, but Guénin thought he

knew where he could get some. He would start out early in one of the light lorries and be back, if he was lucky, by noon.

He would make for Nevers and cross the Loire. General Huntzinger had advised our crossing the Loire as soon as possible. He would see me in the morning. Our hostess had offered the unit the hospitality of the garden and as the weather was fine Miss Stanhope proposed that we should picnic under the trees.

I was sitting in the sun next day with Maureen when the Minister came to find me with an astonishing suggestion. Would I care to telephone my husband? If he had offered me the sun, moon and stars, I couldn't have been more surprised. We were so lost, so cut off from anything that was familiar, so far away apparently from any British unit that I couldn't believe it possible to get in touch with B. But he said he thought he could manage it. Being a Minister he was allowed to use the telephone.

I began to tremble. I remember my legs trembling as I got to my feet. I did my best to speak calmly. I didn't know where my husband was. I knew, or rather supposed, that he was with Paul Reynaud and the French government, but where was the French government?

They were at Tours three days ago, they might be in Bordeaux by now.

Then I remembered what B. had told me. "Ask for *l'ambassade d'Angleterre*, and you'll be put straight through—wherever you are." I could try.

My heart was thumping against my ribs as I followed the Minister into the house. He got through at once to the village post office, explained who I was and handed me the receiver. I said I would like to speak to the British Embassy. A pleasant woman's voice answered that she would ring me back. We waited. In a few minutes she rang through. She couldn't get the Embassy, she said, but she could give me the British consul in Lyons if that was of any interest. I said that it was, and a second later, the first Englishman's voice I had heard since I had said good-by to B. in Paris announced that the British consul was speaking.

"I am Mrs. Spears—wife of Major General Spears—my husband is somewhere with the French Prime Minister—I am retreating across France with my hospital. I would be most grateful if you could get a message through to him."

"I will try, Mrs. Spears. What is the message?"

"Tell him that we are all right—that we are making for Nevers—and that if he will send me a message care of the *préfet* at Nevers I will pick it up there tonight."

"I will do my best to get through to him."

I thanked the Minister and went out into the garden. A pleasant alfresco

meal was in progress. Dorea and Dodo were handing round sardines, bully beef, pickles, salad and cheese. How happy they all looked sitting on the grass with their tin plates in their laps. One would have thought they hadn't a care in the world, were trekking across France for fun. That the half dozen flirtations begun in St. Jean le Bassel had not been interrupted was evident. The officers were gallant, their pretty nurses sparkled. Maureen made room for me beside her.

"Did you get through to the general?"

"No, but I spoke to the British consul at Lyons. He is going to try to get him a message. I said we would call at the prefecture in Nevers for the answer. If B. gets the message he will tell us what to do."

The consul did get through. B. got my message and sent word to the *préfet* at Nevers that I was to make for Bordeaux with my unit as fast as possible, but I didn't know this until I arrived in England two weeks later—For we never reached Nevers. The Germans were too quick for us.

## II

It wasn't until some time after lunch that Guénin finally arrived with the petrol; it took an hour to fill all the tanks; it must have been three o'clock before we moved off—and when we got within twenty miles of Nevers we were warned by a motorcyclist that we would find it impossible to cross the river by the Nevers bridge. It was completely blocked with traffic, but there was a light suspension bridge ten miles this side. It was built to carry a maximum weight of three tons, we might try it.

Gosset decided to make the attempt. There would be no difficulty about the staff cars and light vans. The women could cross safely whatever happened to the five-ton trucks and the X-ray trailer. He took us across first, then went back to fetch the big Renaults. From the far side, I watched him climb up beside the driver of the first heavy lorry; it advanced very slowly; the bridge swayed. It could have taken only two or three minutes but it seemed much longer. There was an agonizing moment when the great loaded vehicle was halfway across and the bridge sagged sickeningly. I waited for a sound of cracking, it held, the truck crawled on and Gosset jumped down in the road beside me. He gave directions to the others, beckoning them on. One by one they crept forward. We had crossed the Loire.

I said to myself, "We are safe." I believed that our retreat was at an end. It was here that the French Army would make its stand. I would go to Nevers next day. There would be a road down our side of the river. I

would cross the Nevers bridge on foot, find my way to the prefecture and get news of B.

I couldn't have been more mistaken. The French had never intended apparently to defend the Loire—and I, as I say, never reached Nevers for the reason that German armor got there next day, traveling down the left bank of the river, while we moved down the right making not for Nevers but for La Palisse.

It was Médecin Inspecteur Wörms who bobbed up, ordered us to La Palisse and by so doing saved us perhaps from driving slap into the enemy. We had pushed on to a village called Torteron after crossing the river and I was sitting alone outside a café. The others had scattered, Dorea to hunt for eggs for our supper, Dr. Bernard to search for billets and the nurses to raid the village sweet shop. I half closed my eyes. I was weary. Suddenly a military car flashed past, a familiar, startled face looked out and a hand waved; it was Wörms with three of his medical staff. They were traveling at great speed but they stopped a hundred yards up the street and I hurried after them.

Where had I come from? What was I doing here? Where was my unit?

The unit was here, I said. Gosset was somewhere about. Dr. Bernard was looking for billets.

Billets? We mustn't stop here—we must push on at once.

I said, "But we have crossed the Loire. I thought once we had crossed the Loire—"

Wörms was breathless and in a hurry. He couldn't stop. He was on his way to La Palisse. If I must stay the night in Torteron then I must. But we were to leave early next morning without fail. I would find him in La Palisse. He drew himself up, puffed out his little chest, became for a moment the pompous inspector general of the IVth Army. It was there, in La Palisse, that he intended to assemble his principal formations. If I would call at the *mairie* at ten o'clock he would leave word as to his whereabouts and give us our orders. No, he couldn't stop now to see Gosset. He turned, scuttled for his car. We would get our orders in La Palisse. He was gone.

I tried to reason it out. Did this mean that the French were not going to defend the Loire or was it merely that the *Service de Santé* wanted their hospitals well behind the front?

A little old gentleman in black with a neat white beard was approaching as I walked back to the café. He lifted his hat. "I am Professor Pernot of the Sorbonne," he said. "Am I right in thinking that you are looking for lodgings for your nurses?"

I said that it was so.

"Then perhaps I can be of some service. I have a house just outside the village. I could give you six beds. I am leaving with my wife and daughters and grandchildren early in the morning but there are three empty rooms with two beds in each and you are welcome."

I accepted with alacrity. He was most kind. I would tell my *médecin chef* and collect five of my young ladies.

"It is just over there," he said, pointing to a wood. "There is a green gate. I will go ahead and tell my wife that you are coming. She and my daughters are packing. I fear that you will find a certain disorder—but it is a pleasant house and the beds are comfortable."

Dr. Bernard was relieved when I told him. To find billets for us all in this meager village was well-nigh impossible. The nurses were casées but not as yet all the drivers. So I collected Maureen, Dorea, Maria, T. W. and Rosie and took them to what we always allude to now as the Constant Nymph's house. For the professor's family were enchanting and absurdly inconsequent even in their distress and the house was delightful. All the windows were open and it was as if a clean fresh wind were blowing through them to turn everything topsy-turvy. The professor's wife met us in the hall. She was a tall, ample woman, still beautiful, her arms were full of bright clothing, pinafores, gingham dresses, bathing suits, her fair hair was tousled, her cheeks were flushed, a couple of delightful sunburned brats clung to her full skirts.

"You will forgive me," she said, "if I don't show you to your rooms." A lift of her fine massive head showed us the stairs. "At the top," she said, and then as we mounted—"There is hot water if you would like baths. The bathroom is at the end of the corridor."

The rooms were flooded with afternoon sunlight. They had an air of gaiety. The twin beds in mine were as I remember painted blue with garlands of roses on the headboards. There were bookshelves filled with children's books. A worn armchair covered in faded cretonne stood by the window. *Les Malheurs de Sophie* lay open on the floor beside a battered doll. One could look out across the rich luxuriant country to the great river that flowed so broad and steady between its strong banks.

How quiet it was, how beautiful, how peaceful. There was no sign nor sound of war. The road up which we had come was empty. The sky was serene, the setting sun was flooding the world with glory.

High sweet voices were calling to one another downstairs. "*Mais je suis certaine que je l'ai mis dans le placard en bas. Regarde encore, chérie. Non, ma petite—non—La Chatte impossible.*"

The professor's younger daughter came up to see if there was anything

she could do for us. I remember her as very slender, a frail creature physically, but spirited, with the ardent sensitive face of an intellectual.

She worked, she told us, at the Ministry of Information at Moulins and had come home to help her parents pack. Her sister's husband was up there, somewhere.

Must they go?

Yes, because of the children. One couldn't submit children to the strain of bombing.

She stared out of the window, her fine eyes clouded for a moment.

"Have you news of England?" she asked.

I said no; we had been moving too rapidly to get letters.

"We look to England," she said, "and Mr. Churchill to save France."

They were still packing when I went down to say good night. They were leaving, the professor said, at four in the morning. The house was ours, his wife said. We must help ourselves. Please would we take the stores? She swept me out to the kitchen, showed me the well-stocked store cupboard, coffee, sugar, rice, macaroni; we must take the lot, otherwise the Germans would have it. And here were a hundred pairs of socks that she and her daughter had knitted for the troops.

"But why do you go?" I asked, thinking of the dreadful stream of refugees on the roads. "Why don't you stay here? You are safer here surely in your own home?"

I couldn't bear to think of this family swept away into that frenzied torrent; stranded inevitably when their petrol gave out, obliged to camp out as so many thousands did by the roadside, killed perhaps or mutilated by bombs.

But they were determined to go and we saw them off next morning not at four but at six o'clock, three women, two children and a frail little old man packed into two small Citroëns, the professor at the wheel of one, a daughter driving the other; bags, bedding, pots and pans tied outside, the children clutching their most precious toys, their eyes big with wonder.

Maureen and I went back into the empty kitchen and took some coffee and sugar from the store cupboard. Dorea said we couldn't carry anything more, the van was already loaded to the brim. All the doors and windows were open to the sunny morning as we drove away.

Maureen sighed. "If there is to be a battle I suppose they were right to go."

We looked back toward the river.

"I don't see any movement of troops, do you?"

"I don't see a soul."

It must have been evident to us all by that time that there was to be no battle of the Loire. I was disappointed—that was all—not frightened. None of us were frightened. I have questioned the girls since and I know this is so. We thought, well, if they don't make a stand on the Loire, that's their business. They'll stand somewhere else.

## III

It was arranged at breakfast that Gosset and I should go ahead to La Palisse in separate cars, that the rest of the unit should start for Moulins at noon and that Gosset should return to Moulins when we had received our orders from Wörms, pick up the unit and take it to join me at our next destination wherever that might prove to be.

I left at nine in my Renault, Rosie driving, Maria as second driver, Dr. Bernard and Mademoiselle Radenac with me as passengers. Gosset was to start at nine-fifteen.

Moulins was worse than Auxerre. We were held up by the traffic for two hours but got through at last and sped south through lovely southern country along a wide road shaded by great trees, reaching La Palisse with its turmoil of traffic about one o'clock. The congestion was considerable. We moved down the main street at a snail's pace; but the cars that hemmed us in now were military and the pavement swarmed with officers. We had caught up at last with the army—and there was Lecomte standing not a yard from us on the edge of the street in front of a hotel called L'Ecu de France.

He saw me, stepped forward, spoke through the car window. General Réquin was there. He was lunching at this hotel. They had taken it over as a mess. He was certain the general would want to see me.

I said that we were on our way to the *mairie* to find Wörms and get orders. We would come back. Would he arrange for us to be allowed to lunch in their *popote*? He would. We moved on. But when we got to the *mairie* there was no message from Wörms, nor at the prefecture, nor at the post office, so we left word for Gosset at the *mairie* that we were lunching at the Ecu de France and made our way back to the hotel.

Lecomte came out and took us through to the dining room. The general, he told us, apologized for not asking us to lunch with him, he was lunching with General Huntzinger, but a table was reserved for us.

It was the sixteenth of June. The French Army was about to lay down its arms. We suspected nothing as we sat down at our table in the pleasant sunny dining room. General Huntzinger, General Réquin and their combined staffs occupied a long table in the center of the room. Every table but our



own was filled by French officers. Several were friends and came and spoke to us. One crossed the room to tell me that General de Lattre had been missing for three days. General Réquin joined us when Huntzinger left the room. He was vigorous and more excited than I had ever seen him. He rapped out his words like hammer strokes.

"I have no longer an army. I couldn't bring up reserves if I had them on account of the refugees. When I find a gun by the side of the road I take it. One must see things as they are."

A staff officer appeared at his elbow to tell him that General de Lattre had got through, had been on the telephone. General Réquin asked me what our plans were. I said we had come to La Palisse to get orders from Wörms but had failed to find him. He said he didn't know where Wörms was, hadn't seen him for some days. If I would come to his headquarters he would give us our orders. Remembering Songy, I said I would make one more attempt to find Wörms and Gosset. Gosset should have followed but he hadn't turned up. We went back to the *mairie*; there was still no message from Wörms and no sign of Gosset. Réquin's headquarters were in a big school. He gave me two maps and told me to make for the Mont d'Or. I said it was too far—that the unit was waiting for orders at Moulins, that as Gosset hadn't turned up I must go and fetch them. He said I was on no account to go back to Moulins. It was Gosset's responsibility to bring on the unit. If the Mont d'Or was too far I had best go to Gannat the other side of Vichy. We stood in the doorway in the hot sun. I said, "If France should make peace, Great Britain will fight on alone, and I must take my girls home."

He was silent a moment, then, "You will have time. You are not the only British unit in France."

I left him on that. I didn't see him again until five years later. He had hesitated, considered telling me the truth that Pétain was going to ask for an armistice next morning, and had decided that he was not free to tell me.

We went back to the *mairie* once more; there was still no sign of Gosset but someone told us where we could find Wörms—and we did find him at last in a village fifteen miles from La Palisse, hiding under some trees. He had quite forgotten that he was to have sent us orders. His only orders, when I asked for them, were, "*Sauvez-vous.*"

We had to decide now whether to go on to Gannat and trust that Gosset would get one of the messages that we left for him at the *mairie*, the prefecture and the post office, or go back to Moulins. Dr. Bernard wanted to go on to Gannat. It was probable, indeed almost certain, that Gosset finding himself blocked by the traffic at Moulins had turned back and taken the unit south on another road altogether. I was tempted for a moment to agree.

To push back to Moulins meant a sixty-kilometer drive toward the enemy and against the flood of refugees. Maria had passed out with a violent sick headache. Rosie would have to stay at the wheel. Could she do it? Bernard was most probably right. But there was just a possibility that Gosset was lying dead or unconscious in a ditch. If that were true, the unit was waiting in Moulins. How could I turn my back on them? I couldn't.

I turned to Rosie. "We must go back to Moulins," I said. "Can you carry on?" She nodded.

Never shall I forget that drive with frail Rosie at the wheel, her curls flying loose under her khaki cap, her horn screaming as we bounded off the road and bumped in and out among the trees. Mademoiselle Radenac beside me was silent. She had been silent all day. Dr. Bernard said nothing more. Maria alas was slumped down in her seat in front, her head lolling. I sat behind Rosie and kept up a steady monotone of command, for she was a gentle creature, not a thruster like T. W.; and to push one's way against the avalanche of cars needed power, persistence, ruthless determination.

"Sound your horn, Rosie. Sound your horn." Then louder when she hesitated. "Sound your horn, I tell you. I'm not cross, but sound your horn."

The sun was sinking on our left. A golden light streamed between the tree trunks touching the demoniac faces of the oncoming mob with a lurid glow. A woman with flying red hair screamed as she bore down on us. Rosie flung her wheel over, the car rolled on the edge of a ditch; we grazed a tree and were again facing the torrent of oncoming maniacs.

It took us three hours to do the sixty kilometers. Moulins was a hell of milling vehicles and terrified pedestrians. There were a good many French troops, I noticed in the crowd. Some were drunk and had hysterical women with them. But there was no sign of the unit. *Mairie*, prefecture, post office, we went to all three, but there was no message. The Germans, we were told, were at Nevers. There was nothing we could do save leave messages and double back, taking the road this time for Gannat.

## CHAPTER X

### I

ANOTHER long drive through the dark. Rosie was still at the wheel. She had been driving since eight o'clock that morning, for the past three hours against grinding torrents of machines—and she was so young. I could just distinguish her head against the shadow in front of me. I feared she might collapse when we got to Gannat, not before.

I was depressed and apprehensive. We were approaching, I felt, a climax. This mad trek across France couldn't go on much longer. Suppose the French asked for an armistice? What should I do? General Réquin said we would have plenty of time. But I had lost the unit. That was the dreadful thing. If they had waited at Torteron they were prisoners presumably by now. But they couldn't have done that. They had orders to come to Moulins. They were to have left Torteron at noon. Even if Gosset were dead in a ditch Guénin would have brought them to Moulins—yet no one in Moulins had heard of them. Then where had they gone?

It was eleven o'clock when we reached Gannat but the dark streets of the little town were filled with lost, hungry, frightened people. The square was crowded with cars; the cars were full of sleeping forms and the hotel was a bedlam. Dr. Bernard and I pushed our way in. Men and women were fighting to get to the dining room, old women and children were asleep on the stairs. An ugly mob seemed to have invaded the kitchen. A man erupting through a spring door clutching a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine was attacked by two screaming women. We made our escape. Food was out of the question. What about beds? Dr. Bernard said, "We'll try the *Bureau de la Place*."

We were recounting our plight to the young lieutenant in charge of *la place* when the telephone rang and there was Gosset talking out of the distant dark. And it had been as Dr. Bernard had thought. He had found it impossible to get through the traffic at Moulins, so had gone back and had taken the unit on another road to a place called Le Thiel. From Le Thiel he had rung up the prefecture at Moulins and been given our destination. "Tell him," I said to Bernard, "to wait for us at Le Thiel. Ask where it is

and tell him we will join him the first thing in the morning—that he is on no account to leave before we arrive.”

The lieutenant said when Dr. Bernard had rung off that the only beds he could find for us for the night were “*chez les frères*.” It wasn’t permitted as a rule for ladies to enter the House of the Brothers but he was sure that the head Brother would take pity on us.

I don’t know how we found our way to that calm refuge. I don’t remember where we parked the car. I recall stumbling through the dark street, knocking at the side door of a high shadowy building and being led up a narrow winding stair by a silent figure in a black cassock. He held his fingers to his lips as he opened the door at the top of the stairs. It was best that our presence should not be known to the younger brotherhood. He smiled faintly. His eyes were serene and compassionate. There were two double bedrooms and one single. You had to pass through one of the double bedrooms to reach this, it was unfortunate. I would share the communicating room, I said, with Mrs. Howe. I was sure Dr. Bernard wouldn’t mind using our room as a passage. Rosie and Mademoiselle Radenac would go next door. The Brother wished us good night and withdrew down the winding stair. How wonderful it was. Beautiful clean beds with white sheets, washstands with clean face towels, and silence, utter quiet. Dr. Bernard disappeared into his sanctum, Maria fell like a log on to her bed.

Ten minutes later when I looked into Rosie’s room I found her asleep, but Mademoiselle Radenac was on her knees, her hands clasped in prayer.

I lay awake for some time. Though it was a great relief to know that the unit was safe, I was still strangely apprehensive. There could be no peace for me until I had rejoined them. Something more, something worse might happen; was, I felt, bound to happen. As long as we were all together I didn’t mind what befell, but being separated from the others filled me with acute anxiety. Suppose Gosset took it into his head to leave Le Thiel before we got there? Suppose the Germans got there before us as they had done at Nevers? Suppose I never found the girls again? I was responsible for them; I had brought them to France—and France was disintegrating before our eyes.

My anxiety was clairvoyant. The worst moment of our retreat was bearing down on me out of the future, I felt it coming.

Le Thiel, Dr. Bernard said, was only forty miles away. If we left by nine we would be there by eleven, and Gosset was certain to wait for us. So we had coffee and biscuits in a café before starting off and I told myself as we took the road again that it was foolish to be in such a fidget. Gosset had been told to wait and he would wait. Why fuss? But I did fuss. Are you

sure we are on the right road, Bernard? Yes, he was sure, look here it is on the map. But we are making for Montluçon, a big town; why should Gosset have taken the unit to this place? He had called it a village, hadn't he? But we were in a large industrial area. It was true. Factories, warehouses, hideous rows of dingy houses stretched ahead of us. We might have been entering the suburbs of London or Manchester.

"Do ask someone, Dr. Bernard, if we are on the right road."

So we stopped in front of a warehouse and asked the way to Le Thiel and were told that this was Le Thiel.

"But it can't be."

"But it is."

"Then how are we to find the unit?"

"We must go to the *mairie*."

So the old search began once more. We asked at the *mairie*, at the *préfecture*, at the *Bureau de la Poste*, as we had done the night before at Moulins. And the result was the same. No one had heard of Ambulance 282. I was frantic. What did it mean?

"Let's try the military hospital," I said in desperation.

It stood on a rise overlooking the hideous *faubourg*. As we turned into its bleak empty courtyard and stopped, I heard Rosie say in a small frightened voice, "I'm afraid we have almost no petrol."

There are moments so intensely disagreeable that they are unforgettable. It may be that they are eternal. I could believe that our solitary car is still standing in that great empty yard, that we are marooned there forever, a helpless group of feeble, bedraggled, insignificant creatures condemned in perpetuity to await the arrival of the German armored divisions. For I feel again the rising hysteria, the frantic helplessness. But now I am scurrying with Bernard across the wide gravel and down the silent tiled corridors of the ghastly place. Is it deserted? Have they all run away? No, an orderly is dozing on a bench outside the *médecin chef's* office and a large unbuttoned disconsolate *médecin colonel* rises from behind a desk as we go in.

"We have lost our unit. We are '*en panne*.' " Suddenly it came to me. "Is there another Le Thiel," I asked, "in this region?"

There was; the depressed colonel showed it us on the map. It was sixty kilometers away. It was not far from Moulins. We had passed close to it the night before.

I looked at Bernard. He faced me miserably. "I am sorry. I forgot to ask Gosset for the number of the road."

It was useless to fly at him in a rage. We must act. We must get to the other Le Thiel before the unit moved off. To get there we must have petrol.

"We've no petrol," I said to the colonel. "Can you let us have some?"

He spread out his big hands. "But I have none—not a drop—When I applied I was refused."

"Where can we get it?"

"At the caserne possibly."

"Where is the caserne?"

"At the top of the town."

I turned to Bernard. Gentle, kind, self-effacing creature, he would have to act for once with power. "We'll go to the caserne, Bernard, and you will get us petrol. You will get it if you have to commit murder for it."

We set off again. We had about two liters in the tank, Rosie said. Hundreds of military trucks were going the same way. A long queue was waiting in the yard of the barracks to fill up.

"Now, Bernard, it's up to you."

## II

He disappeared into the building and we waited. None of us spoke. Truck after truck filled up and drove off. If the pump went dry? At last he came back with a blessed bit of paper in his hand. It was while we were awaiting our turn in the queue that we heard a loud-speaker announce to the assembled vehicles that Marshal Pétain had asked for an armistice.

My first reaction was, "It can't be true. I won't believe it." My second, "I've known since yesterday. Réquin knew. It was already decided when we saw him lunching with Huntzinger." My third, "Everything is changed and everything is worse than it was before. It's a question now of getting the girls out of France. How? Where? I must make a plan. We are a long way from anywhere. We mustn't lose our heads."

No one had said anything. No one spoke as we moved out of the yard.

"Let's get there as quick as we can, Rosie." She nodded.

It was almost as hard going as our drive to Moulins the evening before. But this time the road was packed with the army. An army disorganized, disrupted, without officers or equipment, a rabble in flight. Why? Hadn't they heard the news? If they had, it wasn't enough to stop them. Down they came in a headlong rush, truckloads of men who had thrown away their arms, hatless, flushed, disheveled. Here and there in the mass an ambulance filled with blowsy women and drunken soldiery. We saw no ambulance carrying wounded—nor any officers. Why did they pour down on top of us in this wild insensate way? Where were they going? What had they to fear now from the enemy?

We struggled on. We were silent. What could I say to Dr. Bernard and Mademoiselle Radenac? The war for them was over; for Rosie, Maria and me, it was just begun. We must hurry. It was desperately important to get back to the unit.

We reached Le Thiel at two-thirty. Rosie found her way by instinct to the village square and there, thank God, were our vehicles. But what in God's name was going on?

The trucks were drawn up to one side of the square, the staff cars to the other, the officers were all in a knot in the distance—and the girls—all the girls, nurses and drivers were standing in the center of the square by the war memorial with an assortment of suitcases and parcels on the ground at their feet.

Maureen came forward and said, "We are all ready to go, May."

"Go where?"

"To the coast or to the Spanish frontier."

I stared. I didn't for a moment take in what she meant. I noticed that the officers looked uncomfortable, that Gosset hadn't come forward. Suddenly I understood.

"So you were going without me?"

"I had given you up."

"Who was going? The whole unit?"

"No. I was taking the girls in the staff cars."

"I see; and you were abandoning your luggage. Well, I would like to wash my hands and then have something to eat."

Barbara took me to her billet. "You've arrived, May," she said, quietly, "in the nick of time. We had orders to leave at three. We were about to mutiny."

"Who gave the orders?"

"Maureen. She said we must make our way to the coast at once—that if we waited for you we might be caught by the Germans."

"And Gosset, what did he say?"

"Gosset said she must do what she wished, that he couldn't be responsible for us now."

I went back to the square. The girls had abandoned the war memorial and were gathered on the porch of the café. There were benches and trestle tables. Rosie and Maria were tucking into bully beef and pickles. There was a certain amount of whispering going on—something that was almost like muttering. Not all the faces turned to me were confident. Not all the eyes looked straight into mine. Dorea brought me food and a cup of coffee.

"There's been a spot of panic, boss. Over there in the corner. It's made 'em uneasy. It may need handling."

I knew at once whom she meant. There was one member of the M.T.C. unit who couldn't take it, and only one. I had had my eye on her all along, for she was dangerous. She was the kind of person who when she is frightened becomes savage. She was savage now. Well, I could be savage too if necessary. So I spoke to the lot of them, but my words were addressed to her.

"Since the French have stopped fighting, it is obvious that we must go home. But we've plenty of time. General Réquin told me so yesterday. There are still a lot of British troops in France—and there's no need to worry. I see that you are worried. Some of you may be scared. I don't blame you. No one is to blame for being frightened, I've said that before and I say it again. No one need be ashamed of being afraid. What matters is the way you behave when you are afraid. What is despicable is to try and make others afraid because you are. That I will not tolerate. I think you understand me. Now go and collect your things and put them back in the cars as they were before."

Gosset was alone on the other side of the square. He was standing, his long legs wide apart, his arms folded. There was a haughty, sullen look on his face as I crossed to him. I said I was obliged to reverse Madame Schreiber's decision. We would all proceed together. Would he please give orders to reload the convoy?

"*A vos ordres, madame.*" His mouth was bitter but there was a flash of triumph in his eyes. Was he glad that his prophecies had come true? Did he welcome the humiliation of his nation? I don't know what he was feeling at that moment. I don't even know what he felt about being saddled with twenty-five British girls at this crisis in the history of the entente. He had been ready and willing apparently to let Maureen take them off his hands and start away, all unprepared into the blue. But if he disliked the responsibility I thrust back on him, he shouldered it promptly. We were off again in convoy by three-thirty and from that moment—it was June 17, until we said good-by to him in the village of Noailles at two-thirty in the morning of the twentieth he took entire charge of us all.

We were completely dependent on him now. I pointed this out to Maureen in the car.

"How could you hope to make the coast or the Spanish frontier without maps or petrol?"

She hadn't thought she said, of that.

Didn't she realize that it was only as a part of a military unit that we had any hope of getting anywhere? If she had been left alone with the girls they would have forfeited their official status, would have become



simply a group of lost British women of no standing with the French authorities and with no right to draw petrol. We were hundreds of miles from the nearest port—farther from the Spanish frontier. Who could tell us what port to make for? We had no idea what was going on, what sort of armistice would be signed, where the British were. All we knew was that France was in chaos. To the refugees had been added the army, a disorganized, routed army. It was madness to think that anyone would help us, in the vast distressing confusion. No one would or could help us but our own officers. Guénin must get us petrol. Gosset alone could get us the information we needed. We must stick to 282 until we knew that we were within reach of some British force, naval or military; we could then make a dash for it, not before.

It was as I expected, only more so. My presence in the unit as the wife of a British general, *directrice* of a French ambulance, had obtained for us up to now great courtesy and many favors. All that was changed immediately. That very afternoon, not four hours after the news of the amistice, when I went with Gosset to interview an officer about a place to billet for the night, I was received with such cold animosity that I didn't venture again to intervene with any French authorities. The explanation is clearer to me now than it was at the time. We, the British, were no longer allies—that was all there was to it. I didn't know this but it was so. And they knew it. All the little captains and majors who distributed petrol *bons* and *bons* for billets and *bons* for ration, all were aware that *les Anglais* were leaving them to carry on the war elsewhere. Indeed many were convinced that the British had left them in the lurch long before, at Dunkirk. And some believed that they had never come at all—had only made a pretense of sending troops to France.

Their resentment, these premises given, was natural. What seems extraordinary is that the change came so quickly. I was the great benefactress and friend in the morning, by evening I was an enemy in their midst and was looked upon not only with detestation but with the gravest suspicion.

So I was obliged to hide behind Gosset. And that brings me to the second surprising thing about our last days in France. He didn't like me and I didn't like him. We had been bitterly opposed over the war. He had believed passionately in defeat, I as passionately in victory. We had quarreled and I had said hard things to him. But had I been his mother or his cherished sister, he could not have looked after me and mine more adequately. Not with solicitude, not with any show of kindness or friendliness. No, the other officers were kind and solicitous, not Gosset. Gosset was arrogant, punctilious, extremely cold, brilliantly efficient. If he was having his revenge, it was a superb performance.

## CHAPTER XI

### I

OUR last days on the road throb in my memory, they have a harrowing beauty. As I watch our ragged convoy wind its clumsy way toward the mountains of Auvergne, I feel once more the old poignant mingled emotions of dismay, apprehension and bitter regret. For the tragedy of France was taking place against a glorious background of splendid summer. The deep rich meadows were all adance with daisies and buttercups, rivers laughed, great trees lifted yearning arms to a sky ineffably blue, and the soft shadows of white clouds moved slowly over the sunny hills. Life was sweet, the earth intoxicating.

Oh, beautiful France!

"What a lovely country," we said again and again. "What a wonderful jaunt this would be if we weren't flying for our lives."

"We must come back some day, follow this road again."

"Yes—when?"

The answer held a threat, vague but enormous. When the war, our war, was over. What did that mean in length of time and depth of suffering and extent of horrid change? I didn't want to know.

We had been a happy unit. We had taken Lady Hadfield's gift and made it into a living thing, all of us together, French and British. Now we were being driven apart with our work unfinished, were leaving a task that had scarcely begun. We had believed in our mission, had hoped to save many lives for France, heal many of her broken men, but all that we had meant to do must be left undone. And the spirit of the hospital that bound French and British together, the mutual respect and confidence, the close association with a common earnest purpose, the sense of shared responsibility and worthy achievement, all this was being brought to an end through no fault of our own.

I remembered our patients, I remembered the way Dr. Boutron and Sister Kelsey had combined together to save the life of the poor little Zouave who kept getting lost in his bed. I remembered Huguet and the Strawberry Queen, Evelyn Fuhlroth summoning Gosset at three in the morning. Panic

if something went wrong with a patient, suspense during a crisis, delight when his crisis was past and he was safe. Our surgeons were young enthusiasts, our nurses were nurses by vocation. These were the experiences they had shared and which had made them friends. It was sad to think that the hospital was coming to an end and the unit about to break up.

I think that we all felt the same, with a few, a very few, exceptions. Now that we knew we were to be divided, the British going one way, the French another, I think we felt more united than ever before. Indeed, looking back on those last days with 282 I am surprised by the solidarity of that weary, dilapidated cavalcade. It was evident most especially in what we did not do and did not say. We were worried, nervy, very depressed, but no one quarreled, no one argued or complained, accused or excused. The thing that was going to divide us was too big, too overwhelming and too intimately shared by us all to be talked about. We accepted it as men in the dock accept a sentence of doom and refused to look ahead into that future time when we would no longer be comrades in war.

I find this remarkable. It was at least very decent and it makes the indecent aftermath the more pitiable. For the years that stretched ahead were going to give it the lie, were going to divide us in spirit as well as in body from most of our French colleagues. Dr. Goebbels was going to see to that. The fine feeling animating our officers at the time wasn't strong enough to stand the test of the German occupation.

But for the moment, as I've said, they behaved remarkably well. Observe the difference of purpose that could have divided us: We, the British, were straining forward in order to escape from a France that was being overrun by a conqueror. But for our French companions there appeared to be no escape, nor any possibility of further struggle—so that for them this continued journey had no purpose—save that of helping us.

It may be that Gosset had some idea of getting his people outside the zone that would be overrun and occupied by the Germans, but I doubt this. I think he was acting solely for us. There was no talk as yet of occupied or unoccupied zones. We had no inkling of the terms of the proposed armistice and knew nothing of a movement in the French Army to re-form in England and continue the fight by the side of Great Britain. No one in our group as far as I know had ever heard of General de Gaulle—his name was certainly not mentioned in my hearing. Nor did we hear his call to France over the wireless on the eighteenth. We were making for the derelict château of l'Espinasse on the eighteenth. It was a rainy night, very dark, and we had no wireless. My portable wireless was broken. Someone had dropped it. So we knew nothing of what was going on in Bordeaux and

London. We believed that no armistice had been signed as yet. We were told that fighting was still going on. But where the enemy was we had no idea. He might be in front of us. Gosset was constantly haunted, when we launched out into a new road, by the fear that it might be cut. On the other hand the German advance might have stopped, though that was unlikely. Our only news was what we could pick up by the roadside, and the roads Guénin followed were strangely empty. The flood of refugees and soldiery was still pouring south along the great highways but we had struck off into the hills, and seemed to have left all the world behind. Impossible to imagine what had become of General Réquin, Captain Lecomte, De Lattre de Tassigny. Had the Germans taken over the convent of St. Jean le Bassel? There had been British ships, two days since, someone said, at St. Nazaire, but the town, another said, was in flames. I had thought at one time of making for Cherbourg. What port were we making for now?

I didn't know. I had come to no decision about that by the seventeenth. The doctors were against Bordeaux and in favor of our pushing on to the Mediterranean. They were persuaded that the Germans would take possession of Bordeaux before we could get there. Marseilles they said was much safer. We were traveling slowly, God help us. We were obliged to wait each day, sometimes for hours, while Guénin went foraging for petrol, and the pace of the convoy was the pace of the slowest vehicle. Even so, they argued, we could hope to outdistance the enemy, if I left the unit with my girls in the staff cars a hundred miles or so from the Mediterranean coast.

The plan didn't appeal to me. Bordeaux might be dangerous, it might prove indeed to be impossible, but Marseilles was much farther from England. There was no certainty that we would find a British ship when we got there. If my husband was still in Bordeaux, he would expect me to turn up and would make arrangements for our evacuation. I was miserably undecided.

It wasn't my habit to talk much to the girls about my worries. But I seem to remember going in search of Dorea on the night of the seventeenth in Mademoiselle de Choiseul's magnificent dwelling, and finding a whole group gathered in the immense best bedroom of the château drinking beer, Dorea, Maureen, Barbara, T. W., Maria, Cynthia, Rosie, there may have been others. They pulled me in, produced gin and lime juice, and cigarettes. I sat down on the great Louis XV bed. It was gilt with a high baldaquin of pale yellow damask. The dressing table was gilded too, the chaise longue and the hangings at the great windows were of the same damask. A huge sumptuous golden room. We sprawled on its silks in our bedraggled uniforms, scoffed at our battered faces in the long mirrors.

"Some room, boss. You've done us proud this time."

"Keep your dirty feet off that chair, T. W."

It was impossible to believe in this company that our luck wouldn't hold. I must wait. I had nothing to say to Dorea after all.

I have wondered since what Mademoiselle de Choiseul thought of us. We were to be her guests for the night, and she was standing at the top of her wide stone steps when we drew up in front of her princely door. We must have looked awful. Our vehicles looked in fact almost as if they had been through a war—so did we. Mademoiselle de Choiseul didn't look like that and would never have looked like that, even if she had been one of us, even if she had done the retreat with us, and I can quite see her as a useful member of the unit. She would have remained, I am certain, as immaculate, as well groomed and exquisitely tailored and beautifully sensibly shod as she was that evening when she came out to receive us. No wind of war would ruffle that neat white head, no sleeping in haylofts would wrinkle that trim black coat and skirt, no crash of cannon would shake those sturdy shoulders or cause those steady eyes to quiver.

She greeted us as a great lady accustomed to offering hospitality to an army of guests. She was pleasantly abrupt and reassuringly matter of fact. She had been asked, she said, to prepare the house for a general and his staff but they had not yet arrived. It seemed probable now that they would never arrive, so the house was ours. She led us into a vast circular hall with galleries above. Looking up one saw a distant domed roof. How many were we? Fifty? We could doubtless manage. Many of the beds were large. There were couches and chaises longues, if I cared to take the two top floors for my young ladies. But we would dispose of the rooms as we thought best. We must consider ourselves quite at home.

She withdrew to her own apartments, and we invaded the house, tramped up the stairs, rushed round the circular galleries dragging our bedrolls and kit bags. Five of the girls slept in the best bedroom with the golden damask and vast mirrors. Several in the end were obliged to sleep on the floor. I had a room at the top of the house, my window looked west. I could see for miles over the great oak trees in the park below to the distant mountains of Auvergne. We would travel that way tomorrow. Great and dreadful events were preparing beyond the horizon. This I knew. Britain would be gathering her forces together to meet the enemy. She was alone now. She was calling to her ships, her armies, her airmen. I tried to imagine what the people were feeling at home. Of what had been actually happening in Bordeaux and London I knew nothing.

Churchill had been to Tours in a vain endeavor to prevail on the French

government to continue the war, if not in France in North Africa. He had offered to fuse the French and British empires into one. The offer had been refused, and the proposal to move the government to Algiers voted down. The five hundred French planes waiting on the airfield near Bordeaux to take off for Algiers received no orders. My husband had left for England that morning taking General de Gaulle with him in his plane. They were together in London, they were conferring together over the formation of a French force to continue the war by our side, while I stood watching the sun set behind the Mont d'Or. I only learned of this when I at last reached home.

I didn't see our hostess again until next morning. Dorea had organized our evening meal as usual in the village café. But in the morning a message came that Mademoiselle de Choiseul expected us all to breakfast with her in the dining room. And there she was at the head of an enormous table covered with spotless damask, all set with silver and china. She was pouring coffee in a businesslike way from a massive silver coffee pot, while an old manservant brought rolls, fresh butter and honey. She beckoned me to a chair beside her. She must have been sorry for us. She may even have liked us, for she needn't have done it. A strong, solitary woman, courageous, endowed assuredly with immense wealth, unmarried, in a country where the cloister is as a rule the one acceptable alternative to marriage for a woman of good family, she remains a solid but mysterious figure in the confused and fluid landscape of the war.

She was casual when we thanked her and trooped away. She came out on to the wide steps again to watch us drive off. We left her alone under the towering façade of her great mansion—to await the Germans.

## II

Gosset had decided on consultation with Guénin to bear west through the Auvergne hills and make for Brive. If we could gain Brive we would be within easy motoring distance of Bordeaux, or failing Bordeaux, could turn south and reach the Mediterranean via Montauban and Toulouse. But we had little petrol and were about to be without maps. The road map General Réquin had given me in La Palisse had carried us thus far. But we were nearing the edge of it. And to find our way without would be difficult if not impossible. For this part of the country was strange to us all and sparsely populated.

At each village we came to we stopped while Gosset went in search of a

stationer's, any shop that might possibly produce a map. The result was invariably the same. Every map had been bought up days ago.

We were very worried by lunch time. We couldn't make Brive that day, obviously, but we might, if we were lucky, reach Tulle—if the Bedford and the Dodge and the Hotchkiss, that is, could make the grade. We were lunching on a bank by the roadside and the road ahead wound steeply up. The Hotchkiss had been boiling all morning, the Dodge to Dorea's disgust was being very tiresome and the old Bedford was threatening to lie down and die. But at Tulle again if we were lucky we might find maps and petrol. But Tulle, Bernard said, would be no sort of place to stop for the night. It was sure to be full of refugees. There was a *château* this side of it, the *Château de l'Espinasse*. In fact there were two by the same name. One of the two would surely provide shelter.

So we decided, cheered by memories of golden bedrooms and silver coffee pots, to make for one of the *châteaux* of *l'Espinasse* and began again our laborious crawling ascent through the wild lovely forest-clad mountains, and presently we reached a wide moorland plateau; and crossing it came to an old stone bridge over a little stream, and the road before the bridge was blocked by a great tree that had been laid across it. On the bridge stood an old man with a gun and two slender lads with rook rifles—And the old man called to us to halt, in a quavering voice, and the young lads glared at us with savage determined faces, and we didn't know what to make of it. Then the old man came forward and demanded to see our papers and we understood—and I could have wept. For the old man and the two stripplings had felled the tree and placed it across the road as a barrier and they were defending France against the enemy.

We had begun our journey (how many days ago?) in Lorraine. We had traveled the departments of the Moselle and the Meuse and the Aube. We had made a *sortie* into the Yonne at Auxerre, had come back to go south and cross the Loire into the Allier, and not once had we been stopped at a barrier nor had we anywhere come on any sign of defense or defenders until we reached this lonely plateau and the old man with his two lads who were ready to die to defend their country's soil.

They let us pass when they had seen our papers, and we made *l'Espinasse* in a downpour. But the first *château* was already occupied by the French Air Force so we proceeded to the second and found that it had been derelict for many years and had been taken over by peasants who had repaired only a small part of it. Tramping through the mud of the stable yard with Bernard I found the farmer's family in a dark oak-paneled room that had once been a drawing room, sitting round the supper table by candle-

light. There was, it seemed, no room for us in the house. All the rooms were already filled with refugees from the north. Was there no place, even for the ladies? Bernard insisted. The thin hatchet-faced woman at the head of the table admitted at last that there was a hayloft across the yard over the cowshed, so we followed her lantern through the rain and the squelching mud and climbed a ladder and inspected the loft. It was just a loft and there wasn't much hay in it to lie on but it did provide shelter from the rain. So we came down again to tell the girls. And on the way out through the cowshed the old witch.woman said, "There's a bed here in the cowherd's room. You can have that if you like." But after looking at the mattress I said no, thank you, I would sleep in my car, little thinking that a miracle was awaiting us in the room of the cowherd. Yet so it was.

Gosset had pushed on into Tulle while this was going on. He came back with news. He had found the *état-major* of Paris in Tulle and had run into a French officer, Commandant Raymond Josselin, with whom I had had friendly dealings at the *Ministère de la Guerre* while I was organizing the hospital. The commandant sent me a message. Gosset was to tell me that my husband had been in Bordeaux two days ago but that almost all British units had already left France.

I was seized by panic. We were too late. If all British units had left there would be no ship to take us home.

I had installed myself in the Renault for the night. T. W. had got down my bedroll and I had made myself comfortable in the back seat with a rug and pillow. Gosset stood outside in the rain. I leaned forward. I had let down the window but couldn't see him. I spoke to a shadow.

"That settles it, I shall make for Bordeaux."

"It is for you to decide. But the road may not be open tomorrow."

"We must chance it. We must start at once, there is no time to lose."

"You mean tonight?"

"Yes, tonight."

"Impossible in this weather, and we have no map. The map is finished."

"Then early in the morning."

"Very well."

"At what time, Gosset? How early can the convoy be ready?"

"I will call you at five."

He melted into the dark. I wrapped myself up again, lay listening to the drumming of the rain on the car's roof. We had traveled so slowly. But how could we have gone any faster with the Bedford to drag along and the X-ray trailer being a nuisance on every hairpin bend? Réquin had said we had



plenty of time. He had been wrong, and almost all British units had already gone. We might be too late—

Someone was tapping on the window. It was morning and Gosset was outside in the road.

“Look what I found in the room you despised, by the cowherd’s bed! A map that covers the country we are going to travel. Now say you don’t believe in miracles.”

A strange man. He became that morning a giant. He lifted me up and carried me through the next eighteen hours like a Titan. They were the last we were to spend together. He was his old self again, the man who had whisked me out to the Fort de Vanves, driven me about Paris from *état-major* to *état-major*. Now that I was leaving him he became almost a friend.

We agreed, over mugs of coffee drunk on our feet in the road, that I should leave the formation as soon as we could get petrol and make for Bordeaux with the girls. Raymond Josselin had told him we might possibly get petrol at Brive. There were twenty-six of us. We would need six cars and 500 liters of petrol. It wouldn’t be safe to start with less, as we might have to push on to the Spanish frontier.

“You mean if there is no one at Bordeaux to help us?”

“*Parfaitement.*”

“If my husband is still there, all will be well.”

“We will try to send him a message.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. We will find a way.”

We by-passed Brive fearing again that the road might be cut and reached the village of Noailles about four o’clock. It was a pretty place on a hill a few miles south of the town. The rain had cleared away, the sky was blue, wild roses clambered over the low stone walls. We parked our vehicles along a country road outside the village and I told the girls what I had decided to do.

“We will start for Bordeaux as soon as we can get petrol. Dr. Guénin is going off now to look for it. I am going into Brive with Gosset to try to send a message to the British Embassy. There are twenty-six of us for six cars so you must manage with one suitcase, a bedroll and a haversack or dressing bag each. Please repack while I am gone. The *sergent chef* will get your tin boxes out of the truck. You will have to repack here on the grass. I will see about your places in the cars when I get back.”

I waited a moment, for questions or objections, looking round the circle of faces. They were serious but I saw no sign of dismay—only one was

scowling. No one said anything—so I left them and climbed into Gosset's two-seater.

Brive was hot, its wide blazing streets were crowded but the tide of refugees seemed to have spent itself. Gosset drove in and out of the traffic with his usual savage efficiency. I don't know where he took me—to the *Bureau de la Place*, I imagine, and the *mairie* and the *préfecture*. I know that we went into one hot dreary office after another and that the result each time was the same, a blank refusal to help the English woman.

Gosset would demand to see the person in charge, introduce me, explain my dilemma and ask that a message be sent to the British Embassy in Bordeaux. The person in charge, *préfet* or *sous préfet* or *commandant de la place* or his understudy would smile pityingly, shrug his shoulders, then Gosset would get angry and the person behind the desk would cease to smile and look at me with such unconcealed venom that, after several of these scenes, I felt I couldn't bear any more.

"It's no good, Gosset. They won't help. I am British. They hate us now."

"It would seem so."

"Let's give it up. It doesn't matter. Take me to the post office; somewhere where I can consult a *bottin*—I want to look up the address of the British consulate in Bordeaux."

"Right." But suddenly on the way to the post office he ejaculated, "God, what a fool I am. I've a perfect right as an officer to send a telegram in the ordinary way."

So we burst into the post office, Gosset striding ahead, I trailing after, and he wrote out his telegram and pushed it through the *guichet*.

To Major General Spears, c/o The British Embassy, Bordeaux.

MRS. SPEARS ON THE WAY WITH STAFF OF TWENTY-FIVE. PLEASE ARRANGE JOURNEY HOME. SIGNED JEAN GOSSET, MÉDECIN CHEF, AMBULANCE 282.

The post office clerk looked doubtful when he read it. "I can't guarantee the delivery, *mon Capitaine*."

"No, of course not. But do your best. This is Madame Spears. She is here with her English nurses. She must leave, you understand—otherwise—"

The young man behind the *guichet* looked at me and nodded. "I'll do my best," he said.

We looked up the address of the consulate and went out again into the sun. My head was swimming. The car bounded forward.

"I'll give you an *ordre de mission* for Bordeaux," Gosset said. "And sign it with General Colson's name. He'll never know and if he does he won't mind."

They say Bordeaux is closed—that the military police have orders to let no one through. An *ordre de mission* signed by the chief of staff might help.”

I looked round at him and thought again, “What an extraordinary man.” His face was savage and sullen, his mouth bitter, he was driving as if he hated the car, hated the crowds in the street, hated the world. It was then that he said the words I noted earlier in this story. He spat them out.

“It will do France good,” he said, “to live under the German yoke.”

### III

There was no news of Guénin when we got back. T. W. and Rosie had taken my luggage into a farmhouse near the road so that I could repack in peace. I gave the farmer’s wife my face creams and left my large suitcase full of uniforms, shoes, underwear and so on for the quartermaster to dispose of.

We loaded up the cars and sat down to supper on the grass in a field by the road. There was nothing to do now but wait. If Guénin failed us—Twilight deepened over the fields and hills. The moon rose. The world was still. At ten o’clock Sergeant Altenbach came from the village pub to say that Dr. Guénin had telephoned that he had at last struck the trail of a distant petrol supply and hoped to find it—but we mustn’t expect him for some hours.

The orderlies had lifted the back seats out of the cars and placed them in a row along the roadside as the grass was getting damp. I sat down on one of these with Bernard. Couples drifted away through the moonlight.

Dr. Bernard told me that he was very anxious about the future. He was a Jew and he feared persecution of the Jews, once the Nazis took control of France. He would have asked me to take him to England if it had not been for his family. He could not abandon his wife and children.

We sat together for some time talking in subdued tones. I had not been on intimate terms with any of our officers. But I had always thought of Bernard as a friend and I was very sorry for him. It is strange to recall the mood of that beautiful summer night, in the light of what happened later. If those young Frenchmen had changed only to me personally I would not trouble to note the fact. That Dr. Bernard came to feel toward me a violent antagonism because of what happened in Syria three years later is not to the point here and scarcely worth mentioning. But those other good-bys in the moonlight, the floods of tears, the hopes of renewed meetings, even of marriage, the vows of fidelity—Well, four years is a long time. One must be a romantic fool to believe that the flame of love or desire can

endure for four years without being fed. But it seems strange nevertheless that the spirit of comradeship that had been born out of common danger should have withered and in some cases have been turned into venom through an agency that every one of these men knew to be bent on their own destruction.

Guénin, for instance. He got us our petrol at last. It was two o'clock in the morning when I saw the lights of his truck. I don't know how many kilometers he had traveled to find it. He had carried us across France with gallant untiring energy and remained to the last undefeated. But he wouldn't have lifted one of his strong thick fingers to help us four years later. When we did return to France in '45 and his friend Jean wrote to him, he turned on her with a snarl. His answer was brief. He never wanted to see or hear from any of us, ever again.

I said good-by to the orderlies before midnight. I walked down the long line of vehicles and shook hands with each of the men. None asked if they could come with us to England—and it didn't occur to me to suggest it. But Sergeant Altenbach begged for a souvenir. I gave him a blue enameled cigarette case that my son had given me when he was at Eton.

"What is going to become of all our equipment, Altenbach?"

"I give you my word of honor, madame, that it will not fall into the hands of the Germans. I will set the trucks on fire myself if necessary."

He didn't of course. Huguet told me when he came to see us in Alsace in the winter of '45 that there had been a violent dispute over the matter among the officers, the day after we left. It is I know against Red Cross regulations to destroy any surgical or medical stores. Whatever the reason, Lady Hadfield's gift was not destroyed; whether or not it was seized by the Germans, I don't know.

It would be interesting to know what really happened to these young Frenchmen during the four years of the occupation, what happened, I mean, to their minds. The data are lacking. Huguet is the only one I have seen since we left them. He joined up with General Leclerc's division after the Normandy invasion. His pleasure at finding us again was touching. He had written, he said, to Sister Forbes, hers was the only address he had. But the poor Strawberry Queen was dead by that time, so she couldn't answer.

He could give us little news of the others. Boutron had gone back, he believed, to his family and his private practice. He didn't know what had become of Le Canouet.

Beyond such bare facts I know very little. The girls met Bernard in the south. He and Rousset I know joined the resistance movement. Gosset—I heard only rumors about Gosset. None, as far as I know, came over to

General de Gaulle until after the liberation of Paris. Well—that is their affair. What they felt in their hearts during that time is between them and their God. There were many men and women in France who were brave and true yet who passed for cowards and traitors, and there were some who joined the Free French whose motives were not altogether admirable.

What I would like to know about my former associates is what I fear I shall never know. I wouldn't have expected them to be heroes. Gosset had in him the stuff of a hero but his was a distorted nature. The others were sensitive, charming, chivalrous little men, of no great weight. If they acquiesced in the humiliating defeat of their people and made a submissive best of a shameful existence, I daresay they had their reasons. The reasons don't interest me. What would interest me would be to know if Guénin remained a proud Frenchman, inwardly defiant, essentially true to his own country. The fact that he came to hate us is of little consequence—the other is of immense importance. For Guénin was tough and if the tough guys of France shrugged their shoulders—

But we didn't foresee any of these things when he appeared out of the dark that night of the nineteenth of June with the petrol that was going to carry us to Bordeaux. I had sent the girls who were to drive, to their cars to get some sleep. But as soon as I saw the lights of the truck coming I waked them, and they came tumbling out into the road. It took half an hour to fill up. Each of the cars could carry in addition to fourteen gallons in its tanks five gallons in *bidons*. That should see us, Guénin said, to the frontier if need be. My watch said two-thirty as T. W. let in the clutch of the Renault. With luck we could get to Bordeaux for breakfast. We moved away. Ambulance 282 had come to an end.

## CHAPTER XII

### I

SIX cars carrying twenty-six women hurtling through the night. Would we make it? Would we get there in time? The great highroad to Bordeaux was empty. It gleamed like steel in the moonlight.

I led, in the Renault, T. W. driving, Rosie beside her, Maureen and Jean with me in the back. Napier with Esba Bell brought up the rear.

We were stopped by a military post some fifty miles beyond Brive. I showed the movement order that Gosset had given me with General Colson's signature.

The *garde mobile* studied it, handed it back and said, "You won't be allowed to enter Bordeaux."

"Why not?"

"Bordeaux is closed. No one is allowed to enter the city."

"Nevertheless I must. These ladies are all British. We are obliged to leave France. It is by order of the chief of staff, General Colson." I showed him the name.

He shrugged his shoulders, handed back the paper. "You can try," he said.

We pushed on. Maureen and Jean were asleep. T. W. and Rosie had shown no sign of interest. They were leaving it all to me. It was the same with the others in the cars behind. Our black sheep had made a scene earlier but no one questioned my authority now, nor showed any doubt of my wisdom. I almost wished they would. Their confidence and obedience made me feel isolated.

It was just after dawn that Esba's V8 broke down. We were winding by that time through hills. Maria behind at the wheel of her station wagon signaled with her horn. T. W. drew up. There were only four cars behind us; Esba's was missing. We waited five minutes, no car appeared.

"We must go back, T. W."

We found the V8 a mile down the road. It was the fan belt, Napier said. "I'll give you twenty minutes," I said. "If you can't put it right in twenty minutes, we must abandon the car."

We waited. No one passed us. Another splendid day was dawning on

what seemed to be an empty world. At the end of twenty minutes they gave it up. "I'm sorry, Esba." Well—there it was. It was her own car. The passengers and luggage were removed and divided among us. Kelsey and Fuhlroth got in with me. We were seven people after that in the Renault. The drivers changed over. Rosie took the wheel from T. W. She had been dozing while T. W. drove—but by seven o'clock she was nodding again at the wheel. I began to fear that all the drivers would fall asleep and thought it best to stop. We managed to get coffee in a sordid café of a nameless town—then pushed on again.

The girls were cheerful—not I. If it were true that Bordeaux was closed, we would have to turn south and make for the Spanish frontier. I was sick with apprehension as we entered the city's suburbs; closed or not closed, I was determined to get through. Just how I meant to set about it, I don't know, for we came on no barriers. There was no sign of a control post in the long monotonous streets. We followed the tramlines and drew up in a shaded square near the consulate at ten o'clock, and telling the girls to wait, I got out.

It was very hot. The sun was blazing. There was a crowd in front of the consulate and a British soldier standing against the big door. I pushed my way through to him.

"I want to see the consul."

"He's gone."

"Where?"

"To Bayonne."

"You mean the consulate is closed?"

"That's it, miss."

"Well, there must be someone, or you wouldn't be here."

"There's the military attaché upstairs, but he won't do anything for you."

"We'll see about that."

He didn't try to stop me. I slipped past through the door and ran up the stairs into an office. An enormous fire was burning in the grate. I thought, "The British have gone mad—a fire in this heat," then realized that they were burning papers. "They" were two pleasant young Englishmen and I said to them, "I am Mrs. Spears," and they said, "We've been so worried about you. Have you got your girls with you?"

"Yes, they are outside. Is my husband here?"

"No, I'm afraid he's gone."

"Back to England?"

"Yes, he left two days ago."

"Oh—"

"But we've been expecting you. We had a telegram signed 'Gosset.' The Ambassador is still here and Lord Melise Graham, the military attaché. They are making arrangements— If you don't mind waiting a few minutes. Do sit down, you look dreadfully tired."

I murmured something about a plane. I had hoped my husband could have sent us home in his plane. It was true, we were twenty-six—still—

"I'm afraid the general took the plane with him."

"I see."

"But you musn't worry. We are going to send you and your girls home. The Ambassador will see to that."

So the man in the post office at Brive had been a friend after all.

I was given a chair in the next room by another huge fire. Presently Lord Melise Graham came to me, very solicitous, very kind, rather worried. Had we got enough petrol to get to Arcachon? Yes. Then if we would push on to Arcachon and call at a certain villa, we would find a naval officer there who would tell us what to do. If we would be there by six.

I said, yes certainly, but it was not yet eleven in the morning. Would it be possible for us to go to a hotel first and have a wash and some food? We'd been traveling all night. The girls were tired and dirty.

I didn't realize that I was suggesting the impossible. I had forgotten that the French government had fled to Bordeaux, or if I remembered, was too dazed to realize that half the official world of Paris with their wives and their clerks and their mistresses had swarmed into the city filling its hotels and restaurants with their clamor, their quarrels, their frivolity and their greed, their terror and their sordid intrigues. I didn't know that my husband had taken General de Gaulle with him to England. I only heard the strange story of Bordeaux when I got home. No one told me that day as I sat by the blazing fire and watched young men throwing bundles of papers on to the flames that a cruiser was waiting off the coast in waters infested with enemy submarines, to take away the Ambassador, who was waiting until the French capitulation was actually signed. No one told me anything, and I asked no questions, was only dimly aware of the atmosphere of suppressed excitement, of the hurried but quiet destruction of documents and of the murmured consultations going on next door.

Melise Graham came back presently to say that he and his secretary would be delighted to put their bedrooms in the hotel at our disposal for the day. We could at least have hot baths, and he hoped get some lunch.

Were we in funds?

Yes.

Did I know Arcachon?



Yes. I had been there some years before.

The villa we were to go to was a little way out beyond the town and the harbor. If I would call there (he wrote the name down) not later than six o'clock, I would be told what to do. He needn't caution me that we must say nothing to anyone.

I thanked him and went back to the girls—such good girls, patiently waiting.

"All is well," I said. "My general has gone, but the Ambassador is still here and the military attaché has lent us his rooms. We are going on to Arcachon, but we'll have baths first, then lunch."

Alas, we could get no lunch, either in the hotel or outside. The town seemed to be filled with restaurants, but all were crowded and no one would take us in. At the sight of our uniforms, the sound of our English accent, every door was closed, sometimes very roughly. Everywhere we met with scowls, abrupt refusals. We divided into small groups, hoping that in twos or threes we might worm our way into those enticing interiors with their clattering dishes and succulent smells. I told the girls they could do as they liked until four o'clock. At four they must all be in the square and in their places in the cars. They scattered. The shops were all open, the windows alluring. Silk stockings, lace underwear, sweets, picture postcards. Being British was no passport to favor in Bordeaux, but we were allowed to spend. I believe some even got sandwiches in a snack bar. Maureen and I managed to get coffee at about three; and then at four everyone turned up in the square, save MacManaway. Where was she? Nobody knew. Who had last seen her? "She was with me," Kelsey said, "half an hour ago. She went into a shop."

"What sort of shop?"

"I think it was a hat shop, I'm not sure."

"In which street? Do you remember the name of the street?"

"I'm afraid I don't. It was one of those streets up there." She waved a hand.

I was frantic. MacManaway couldn't speak a word of French. She wouldn't know how to ask the way.

"Come, T. W., the rest of you stay here. I can't have you all running round looking. I'll lose the lot of you."

I rushed up toward the crowded streets. "You go that way, T. W." We hurried through the throng, poked our heads into shop after shop. It was like struggling in a dream. I was panting, breathless—we might miss the ship. There must be a ship of some kind somewhere waiting to take us away from these strange, rude, unfriendly people who had once been our allies.

We had been told to be at the villa at Arcachon not later than six. It was already four-thirty. Suddenly I saw her sailing ahead of me, her long nurse's cape billowing behind her. A tall, graceful, unconscious and very alien figure heading serenely in the wrong direction. "MacManaway," I gasped.

## II

I needn't have worried. There was, as it turned out, no hurry. Repeated delays, interminable waiting, an agony of prolonged suspense lay ahead of us.

We reached Arcachon in a cloudburst. The huge parklike drives of that pleasure resort were rivers by the time we found the villa, but the rain had stopped suddenly and Ian Fleming, whom I had met in London, looking very smart as a naval lieutenant came out to the gate. He smiled when he saw the five cars full of females, a little as Captain Lecomte had smiled long ago on a winter evening in Nancy, the British version of the same smile of amused admiration, but less gentle, with less of chivalry than the other, and more of wry humor, even a touch perhaps of annoyance. Well—we were after all of his own blood and we had not come to offer our services, we'd been thrust on him and would probably be a great nuisance.

He took me to a pleasant sitting room with deep armchairs and gave me a drink. The complete man of the world and perfect host, but he was not very forthcoming. We would be looked after. I musn't worry. If we did just what we were told. Had we had any food? No. Then I had better take the girls now to get supper. There was a restaurant up the road. He would send for us when we were wanted. Yes. We would be leaving tonight. He would send someone to the restaurant, we would have time for supper, but must leave immediately we were sent for.

So off we went again and the restaurant looked more inviting than anything we had seen for some time. It had been built to entice the rich tourist. It stood back from the road among pines. There were clean red and white checked cloths on the tables. A magnificent bar offered a choice of innumerable drinks.

Could we eat?

But certainly we could eat. What would we like? The waiter was a waiter out of another world—a world of pleasure, of delicate appetite, of amorous week ends and sensuous laughter. I ordered cold meat, salad, bread and butter and beer for twenty-six ladies.

While we waited I thought of my last visit to Arcachon. We had approached it, my husband and I and the children, in a small yacht and had been unable to enter the harbor. A tricky harbor—there was a dangerous

sand bar. We had lain outside, had sent up flares signaling for a pilot, but no pilot had come out so we had had to push on through a stormy night to Bayonne. No—that was wrong, that had been on another trip—when? I couldn't remember; my head was aching. But we had anchored at some time in Arcachon and spent our time ashore eating oysters. It was a great place for oysters. Why hadn't I thought of asking for oysters? But it was June, the twentieth of June, and there was a war going on somewhere and we were trying to get out of France. And here was our supper; cold meat, salad—

And what cold meat! Great silvery platters of thinly sliced rare roast beef and pink ham and tongue arranged in a beautiful pattern with a fringe all round of aspic. And what delicious bowls of crisp lettuce, and what white rolls and what golden butter. But before we could touch it, before anyone could take one mouthful, there was a sound in the road of a motorcycle and a petty officer of His Majesty's Navy came hurrying in. We must leave at once. We must go immediately to the harbor. He would show us the way to the jetty. Twenty-six delicious slices of cold roast beef—twenty-six empty stomachs. It was almost too much. We left the ham and the salad and trooped away, and when we reached the jetty we waited, for there was no one there. We waited an hour. We waited two hours. Then a message came to say that all arrangements has been canceled for that night. We were to be at the jetty at eight o'clock in the morning. We would be accommodated in the meantime on the top floor of a near-by hospital; the wards were empty, there were plenty of beds; we could sleep in them.

It was food we wanted even more than beds. But there was no food to be had. All the restaurants in Arcachon were closed by that time, so we dragged ourselves up to the top floor of the hospital and laid ourselves down in rows on the bare mattresses and slept. And in the morning, when we went back to the jetty, it was the same thing again—orders were canceled. We must wait. We could wait, if we wished, on the beach. I must be able to assemble my unit within twenty minutes. With that proviso we could do as we liked.

The hospital where we had slept was on the sea front, and the *médecin chef* took pity on us. He gave us coffee and rolls on the terrace.

"You have come from far?" he asked.

"Yes—from Lorraine."

"And you are leaving now for England?"

"I hope so."

"There is a ship, perhaps, coming to take you?"

"I'm afraid I don't know."

How silly, I thought, to lie. There must be a ship. There was no other

possible explanation of our presence. He knew all about our fruitless trips to the jetty.

Boddles and Josie and a dozen others besieged me. Might they go in swimming? They had seen some bathing suits in a shop round the corner. The sea looked wonderful. It was going to be frightfully hot.

"Certainly," I said. "If you want to—but you must be within call. I'll come down with you to the beach."

All I wanted was sleep. I found a bit of shade under a scrubby pine above the sands. "Here," I said to the girls. "I'll be here." I spread my cape on the ground and lay down and slept.

A voice woke me, a light pleasant woman's voice speaking in French.

"It is Madame Spears, is it not?"

I sat up. A young woman in a pretty linen dress and sandals was standing beside me. Her toenails were scarlet, her hair was beautifully waved; she carried a parasol. And beyond her stretched the sands. I rubbed my eyes. The sands were swarming with holidaymakers. Lovely ladies in *maillots* lay under gay striped umbrellas, children were busy with spades and buckets. It was like Deauville at the height of the season.

"We met in Paris," the lady was saying, "at Madame X's—you don't remember?"

"I am sorry."

"You are alone here?"

"No—not exactly."

"I see that you are in uniform."

"Yes."

"They say you are going to England, that you expect a ship. Is it true?"

"I'm afraid I don't know."

But the lady was very persistent. "I have a friend," she said, "a French officer who wants very much to go to England. Could you take him with you?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm afraid I know nothing. If you will excuse me." I scrambled down the bank on to the sands—not only to get away from her. It had suddenly come to me that I would never be able to find the girls in the crowd on the beach. How could I assemble them in twenty minutes? As long as they were in uniform it was easy. But in bathing suits they looked like anybody else. They might be far out to sea. But there, thank God, were Dorea and Maria, sitting fully dressed in the sand.

"Pretty sight, isn't it?" Dorea said.

"God! But it makes me sick." Maria was savage.

"Perhaps," I said, "the war was only a very bad dream."

I told them about the woman with the parasol. "If we hang round this beach much longer," I said, "everyone in Arcachon will know we are expecting a ship. Where is T. W.? I'm going up to the villa."

"She's asleep in your car."

There was a naval captain with Ian Fleming. I told them of my encounters. If there were spies about, if there were submarines outside, if there was a ship waiting somewhere, surely it was madness to leave twenty-five English girls hanging about the beach.

I learned next day that there were believed to be a number of Italian submarines in those waters and that the admiral in command of the cruiser that was to take the Ambassador home was even more exasperated than I at being kept waiting. But that was when we had at last found the "Galatea" and been taken on board. We had another eighteen hours to wait on that seemingly frivolous shore.

I daresay we were unfair to those languid young men and pretty women who lay with such apparent insouciance on the sands. What else could they do? What could be more sensible than to let the children build sand castles while the Germans advanced down the fine macadamed road? How would it help to keep the kiddies indoors? The Germans weren't likely to machine-gun a beach full of pretty women. They were right, one may say, those elegant creatures with their varnished toenails. Or were they so sensible after all? Suppose they had refused to lie in the sand with their husbands and lovers? Suppose they had been even a little different, even a little more determined not to accept the defeat that had been agreed to in Bordeaux?

I have wondered about the French officer who wanted to get to England and about the *médecin chef* of the hospital who took us in for the night. We left him the four Ford station wagons and the Renault. I hope he made good use of them. But perhaps he would have come with us if the Navy had been able to take him. We found quite a number of French officers on the "Etric" when we were transhipped to that vessel in St. Jean-de-Luz. But of course the number that the "Galatea" could take was strictly limited.

I remember collecting someone's English governess from a cottage hidden away in a lane, then there were the five wounded British soldiers who had come from north of Paris in an uncovered truck and been ten days on the road. One had an open fracture, his arm was in plaster. His nurse had given him a bottle of disinfectant and he had been treating his wound by the simple method of pouring the stuff into a hole in the plaster every so often. But it was the captain who was in really bad shape. I found them

in their truck at Fleming's gate that afternoon after he had moved us from the beach to the garden of another villa near by, and he asked me to look after them. So we took them away to our garden and laid them on rugs on the grass, and Jean and I went back to the hospital in the town and fetched dressings, forceps and so on. So we were able to fix them up.

It was at three-thirty next morning that we made our last trip to the jetty and were taken off in a couple of sardine boats (half the girls in one, half in another)—and the following three hours were without question the worst of any I'd endured since our trek began. To begin with the wind had risen, the sea was rough, the night dark as pitch and the fishermen who had been charged to take us past the tide rip thought we were mad. They kept saying it in their patois.

"Who but the British would be so insane as to expect us to find our way out past the sand bar on such a night?"

The girls were prostrate, some were violently sick, and didn't listen. Naval Cadet Mr. Pim couldn't understand. He was in charge of my boat and kept asking me, "What are they saying?"

"They say the British Navy is crazy to send them out with a lot of women on a night like this."

Pim was sweet. He looked about fourteen, and took his responsibility very seriously. I hope that he is alive, that he didn't go down when the "Galatea" was sunk and that he won't be hurt if I laugh at him just a little, for when at last we did get past the tide rip and were out in the open sea, there was no sign of the "Galatea" and it really didn't help much for Pim to flash my pocket torch into the immense and very dark night and fire his little pistol into the wind. And I cannot honestly blame the fishermen for not believing him when he waved his young arm toward the north and declared the ship was out there, not south as they thought. What was the good, I said, of arguing with the old boys. You couldn't see a thing. The cruiser obviously would carry no lights—so what could we do? We must wait until daylight—and we did wait, rolling about in the troughs of the waves in the dark, and if I hadn't been so desperately anxious, I would undoubtedly have been as sick as all the others.

Yes, that couple of hours was for me the worst of all. For as I clung to the gunwale of the horribly rolling craft I kept saying to myself:

"After getting them away, I shall have to take them back. After getting them at last safely out of France, I shall have to take them back again."

And then it began to grow light and I found that Pip Scott-Ellis was upright and I called, "Pip—for God's sake use your eyes—look for the ship." And there at last we saw her on the horizon coming from the south; and

we made for her in our two boats and at six o'clock I climbed the gangway and handed the girls over to the British Navy.

Rosie tells me that she was more frightened on the voyage home than at any other time since our retreat began. It was not so with me. With the need for taking decisions involving the girls' safety at an end, I was incapable of further anxiety. But I was annoyed when we reached St.-Jean-de-Luz and I was told that we were to be transshipped from the "Galatea" to the "Etric"; I protested. It was useless. The admiral was adamant. The "Galatea," he said, was a fighting ship. He couldn't risk an engagement with twenty-five women on board! So we were pushed off on to the "Etric," that was already carrying a thousand too many passengers, and found ourselves quartered on D deck with a battalion of Poles who remained in their hammocks most of the day, swinging their Polish bottoms gently above the long tables where we ate and singing their Polish songs through most of the night.

The troops officer was apologetic. "If I'd only known," he kept saying, "that you were coming on board. I've got three thousand souls in this ship. All the private cabins were filled days ago by rich old ladies from their villas in the south of France."

"It's lucky we didn't go that way. Our officers wanted us to try Marseilles. I don't suppose we'd have found a ship."

"We're the last British transport to leave France," he said—"and about time too. I tell you what—you take my cabin at night. I don't go to bed at night. I'll take it over during the day. But it makes me sick to have to put your girls in hammocks down on D deck when the first class is full of lap dogs and ladies' maids. If we did meet a submarine—" He gave me detailed instructions as to what we were to do. There were lifeboats for a quarter of the passengers. He'd be damned if he was going to let service women be caught below decks.

I wandered down the promenade deck past the old ladies in their deck chairs, to see if Lady Hadfield was among them. She wasn't. She had stayed quietly in her villa on Cap Ferat—and they weren't all of them so very old, these women lying comfortably against cushions, and some were acquaintances who were eager to talk—so eager that I went back to my friend the troops officer next day and said, "I wonder if you could suggest to the first-class passengers that it would be a great kindness to let my girls have the use of their cabins for an hour or so in the mornings or afternoons—just to lie down in." And he did ask them, but none responded—not even those whom I had met at dinner parties in London before the war.

So I slept in the troops officer's cabin and the girls slept in hammocks—they were moved from D deck to what had been the Families' Dining Room

third-class—and we fetched our meals in iron buckets from the galley and sat on the floor of the deck during the rest of the time. And we didn't mind how shabby we looked. Indeed we rather fancied ourselves, I think, and were rather sorry for "the old girls" as Maria called them who had been in the south of France and had missed all the fun.

"For it was fun, *Madame la Générale*, now wasn't it? Do you remember when Josie lost your washing and had to get out the town crier?"

"And the pink village," Boddles cried. "Too lovely."

"And the hot cross buns from Klein's with swastikas on them."

"They weren't swastikas."

"They were, I swear they were."

"You will take us back to St. Jean, won't you, boss—when the war is over?"

"It's not over yet."

No. It was only beginning when we landed in Plymouth on June 26, 1940, and the girls followed me in single file down the gangway. But we didn't worry about that. We only knew that we had got home.

We had started out in February with a complete hospital—all beautifully loaded on to handsome trucks; and we had lost it. The X-ray trailer and the sterilizing truck and the rolling kitchen, Dorothy's blue blankets and the pillows Gosset had kept throwing away; we'd lost the lot. And the cars the girls had given had been left on the quais at the end of the jetty in Arcachon, together with the Renault Lady Hadfield had brought to me in Paris. Such a pity. Such a waste. But she would understand.

A military police sergeant was standing at the foot of the gangway, as I stepped ashore.

"Mrs. Spears? But you are the lost unit we've been worrying about."

"Are we? Well, you needn't worry any more. I've lost none of the girls."



## PART TWO



## PART TWO



### CHAPTER XIII

#### I

GENERAL DE GAULLE was unknown even to his own compatriots when my husband brought him back from Bordeaux to London on the eighteenth of June, 1940. Almost no one in France or Great Britain knew his name; nor did the French in England receive him kindly. They looked askance at this brigadier general who had been Under Secretary for War in Paul Reynaud's government for a few short weeks and now dared defy Marshal Pétain and set himself up as the leader of French resistance.

"*Quie est-ce que le Général de Gaulle?*" they said to me. "*On ne le connaît pas.*"

There were many Frenchmen in England at the time. Of the hundred thousand French troops who had been rescued by our navy from Dunkirk a large proportion had returned to France, but the French expeditionary force from Norway was quartered in Great Britain. They were commanded by General Bédouard and included some of the best troops in the French Army. Many had been wounded at Narvik and were convalescing in British hospitals. Our ports at the same time had provided refuge for important elements of the French Navy. Some fifteen thousand French sailors were in camp at Aintree; and many of the officials who had acted for France since the outbreak of war were still with us. These included the staff of the French Embassy, the large military mission under General LeLong, the French consulate general in London and the numerous consulates scattered over the country in cities like Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham.

What was to become of them all? That was the burning question for General de Gaulle, the embarrassing problem for the British authorities and my husband's very special preoccupation. For he and De Gaulle had a single common purpose, to persuade the French people to continue the war; and they had the wholehearted support of the Prime Minister in their project.

B. had installed De Gaulle in an office next his own in St. Stephen's House, Westminster, by the time I reached home, had formed a military mission under the war cabinet to organize French resistance and was already engaged in a score of battles on De Gaulle's behalf. Battles with the War

Office and the Admiralty and the Ministry of Propaganda, battles with the Supply Services, Military Intelligence, the B.B.C.; battles with De Gaulle himself, for De Gaulle was sore, his nerves were raw, he objected to any form of publicity, and publicity was essential to the success of his crusade.

It was only a few days before I arrived with the girls that B. brought De Gaulle back to England, but recruiting had already started for the Free French forces. I remember my bewilderment on my first evening at home. It didn't surprise me to find my husband going all out on a new war job, and so full of it that he could think of nothing else, nor was it remarkable that he should still be interested in France and the French. But I didn't know what he was talking about when he spoke of the Free French. I have never heard the words before, hadn't a notion to what they referred. When we left Arcachon we had no knowledge of any movement in England to organize the French troops who were willing to fight on. Had we only known when we left our formation at Noailles, I was certain that some of the men would have come with me. But as I've already said, we missed General de Gaulle's broadcast of the eighteenth of June. I didn't know that such a man existed until suddenly I came home to find B. absorbed in his cause and on fire with the possibilities it held out.

The atmosphere of London was strange. There was a hush, a sense of suppressed momentous tension, as if the great city and indeed the nation were holding its breath while it grimly, silently, prepared for the expected invasion, but nothing was more strange than my husband's faith in the man I had never heard of and his absorption in the future of a nation I had seen pouring in a panic down the roads of France. For I had thought its fate sealed, had believed the story to be finished.

"We passed close to V——" I said. "I thought of Gaston. I would have liked to visit your grandmother's grave, but I couldn't, we were swept on."

He wasn't listening. What was this thing that so absorbed him? If he were not even interested in hearing about V——?

And then in the quiet of the room where we had sat during the first weeks of the war, with Voltaire standing undisturbed on his pedestal, he explained.

France was going to be cut off, he said, from all the outside world, and subjected from now on to relentless propaganda—and that propaganda would be directed to the one purpose of bringing the French in against us. Such an idea appeared unthinkable now, but the war might last a very long time and the people of France would know nothing about it save what the Germans chose to tell them. We would be obliged, moreover, eventually to bomb French towns. If the German propaganda were successful and the

French as a nation took up arms against us then we might lose the war. One thing and one only would counteract German influence—the fact that a French force was fighting with us.

“And De Gaulle is the man?”

“Yes, the Cabinet has recognized De Gaulle as the leader of French resistance throughout the world. We’ve opened a recruiting station at Olympia. Those who don’t join De Gaulle are being collected at the White City. The orders are that they are to be left free to decide for themselves. If they want to return to France we undertake to send them back, if they choose to remain and fight on they can enlist in the Free French forces. Those who do so decide acquire the status of our own troops, receive the same emoluments, equipment—all that.”

Gradually as the days passed I began to understand. It wasn’t merely a question of enlisting the French troops in England; what was even more important to Britain was the attitude of the great French Empire. Casablanca, Algiers, Dakar, the Chad, Madagascar, Djibouti, Indo-China. Most were little more to me than names at that time but the names quivered in the air of B.’s office, electric with possibility of aid or disaster. What would they do? Would they rally to General de Gaulle and help us, or would they close their harbors to our ships and help the enemy?

It is amazing to me now, looking back on those days of desperate suspense and preparation, that De Gaulle with his handful of followers or my husband with the half-dozen officers of his mission should have hoped to bring over to our side any considerable part of the great French Empire; but they did. They had faith even after Oran. They seemed to find it impossible to believe that the French colonies would acquiesce in the humiliating terms of the armistice and take their orders from Vichy. For the colonies had not been invaded, nor had the French colonial armies suffered defeat. There appeared to us in London to be no need nor excuse in Morocco or Madagascar for capitulation. We in Great Britain knew that we were preparing for a long war which could have only one end, we knew it so well that we could not understand that in the eyes of the world outside we had already lost the war and would be brought to our knees by Hitler’s invading army in a few weeks. But to the French nation and the French colonies this was the truth: for the iron curtain was down and they were already on the other side of it. The great tragedy of a people being led blindfold to their own destruction had begun. From now on for four years, the French nation was to watch the world conflict from the opposite side of an all but impassable gulf.

We didn’t take this in. We didn’t accept it. How could we? When I say

we—I mean my husband and all the British who loved France and of course General de Gaulle himself and those who rallied to him.

I see them now as a very small company of magnificent madmen. There was no sense in what they were trying to do. Reason should have convinced them that they had no chance of succeeding. Repeated disappointments should have proved to them that their project was doomed. But they were inspired by something more powerful than logic. With continued opposition inside Britain and failure outside, De Gaulle grew only more bitterly concentrated on the task he had set himself, B. the more grimly determined to help him.

It was in the very nature of the problem that De Gaulle should be as difficult to help as a man could be. To build him up into a world figure was essential—but he could not and would not see this. His aversion to personal publicity was so intense that I think it must have sprung from a passionate desire to believe still, in spite of all proof to the contrary, that the French people and notably the French colonies would vindicate the honor of France by continuing the war of their own volition and not in answer to an appeal sent out from London by one man, himself, who had sought refuge in Britain. I think that the whole business of personal propaganda was humiliating to him. But it had to be done. To make him known against his will, to get him a clear field on the wireless and persuade him to make the most of it; find him not only a recruiting center in London but a camp outside where his recruits could be trained, were some of the initial tasks of the Spears Mission, and without the Prime Minister's wholehearted support the thing would have been impossible.

The story of how my husband brought General de Gaulle back to England from Bordeaux on the eighteenth of June, 1940, is not my story but the fact is known, and it had momentous consequences that General de Gaulle would be the last to deny. Indeed if he had not asked his friend Spears to come to his rescue General de Gaulle might never have become the head of the Fourth French Republic, but we will let that pass. I only came into the picture when the thing was done and General de Gaulle was safe in London, as safe that is to say as any of us. What surprised me was that no one of first importance among his countrymen was with him. French officers were arriving in fishing boats and colliers. Boys of sixteen to twenty were turning up by the score. There were ways of getting out of France. Madame de Gaulle had come with her children to join her husband. It was all very puzzling. For the members of Paul Reynaud's government it had been, I understood, well-nigh impossible to get away. General Weygand, I was told, had issued orders for General de Gaulle's arrest on the day that Marshal

Pétain took over and asked for an armistice, but there must have been some leaders who could have escaped. What, I wondered, had become of General Georges? And our old acquaintance General Façalde who had been military attaché at the French Embassy during the last war and was in command of an army corps during the Battle of Dunkirk? And Réquin, and Captain Lecomte and General de Lattre de Tassigny? I had lost Réquin. I had last seen him at La Palisse on the fifteenth but we had come on the *état-major* of Paris at Tulle, near the Château de l'Espinasse. It couldn't have been impossible for General Colson's staff to get away. If I could do it with twenty-five girls one would imagine it within the power of the French officers in the same region. It looked almost as if they hadn't wanted to get away; were resigned; were prepared, perhaps like Gosset, to welcome their Calvary.

I knew that the French officials in England were against De Gaulle. All the Embassy, all the French mission including my old friend General Lelong, who had helped me when our unit was leaving for France, all the consulates were against the Free French movement. Indeed a high French official was doing his best to stop everyone from joining De Gaulle.

"Why, B.?"

"For various reasons. The instinct of the official to cling to his job. Pétain's prestige. De Gaulle to most of these people is nothing more than a *franc-tireur*."

"And in Bordeaux? Surely there must have been others in Reynaud's government who agreed with De Gaulle? Why did you bring only De Gaulle and his A.D.C., was there no one else who wanted to come?"

"There were only two men I knew in the Bordeaux government who were wholeheartedly for going on with the war. De Gaulle was one. Georges Mandel the other. Mandel wouldn't come. I did my best to persuade him. He said he would leave later, not now. I knew that being a Jew he would be for it if he stayed. I felt a certain delicacy about alluding to this—but at last I said to him. 'In your case, *Monsieur le Ministre*,' and he smiled; 'It is just because of my case that I can't leave. But I'll join you in a few days.' He must have left it too late."

## II

It is a little difficult to recall my own state of mind at that time. It is always easier to remember what one did than what one felt, but it all seemed quite simple. I had come back to find my husband absorbed in the task of organizing French resistance; that I should take part in the effort was plainly indicated. I slipped into it without question and opened a canteen for the

French recruits at Olympia within twenty-four hours of my arrival in London.

Dorea, Maria, Cynthia and Rosie gave up going on leave and set to work with me, then others came forward; Kathleen Queensbery, Sylvia Henley, Mrs. Huxley were among these. A week later we opened a second canteen at the White City, with Kathleen Queensbery in charge, later on still a third at Euston. Sylvia Henley took over that very unhealthy place. By the end of July I had moved into camp with the Free French troops, was installed with a reorganized unit of twenty to thirty young women in a large hut, popularly known as a spider in Delville Barracks, Aldershot Command, and had become a general welfare officer in the Free French forces.

One might have thought perhaps that the Hadfield-Spears unit had had enough of the French Army or even for the moment of active service. It wasn't so. We had come back to find England awaiting invasion, how could we remain idle? We had tried each other out, we didn't want to disband. That at least is what I felt. I didn't want to lose these girls. Nor did it occur to me to say that I had had enough of the French Army. On the contrary I was identified, in my own eyes, with the French Army. I didn't know then that Guénin was going to hate the Hadfield-Spears Unit and that Dr. Bernard would one day attack me in the press because of what was going to happen two years later in Syria. As for General de Gaulle, if anyone had told me that he was one day going to turn all the batteries of his propaganda against my husband, I would have laughed.

I didn't know him. I hadn't even met him when I set to work at Olympia. I realized at once on meeting him that I would never know him, that here was a man whom it would be impossible to call a friend, but I believed in him. I meant what I said when I offered to organize and equip a new field hospital for the Free French and go with his troops overseas. I told him that the only active service I had ever known was with the French Army, that war for me meant France and that all I asked was to go on with the work I had begun in 1914. It was true, I remembered Ambulance 282 with affection and regret. I remembered General Réquin and Captain Lecomte with gratitude and undiminished confidence. I trusted them wherever they were—and I believed in De Gaulle. He represented for me all that was left of the France I had been proud to serve.

My will to continue to serve, and this time under his orders, was a result of the creed I live by, of my faith not in Englishmen or Frenchmen or Americans but in human beings. I don't mean that I believe them to be fundamentally noble or good. I have come to no simple conclusion on that. I merely mean that they are for me the only reality, the one bit of the world that I can hope to understand and I know that for good or bad I am joined



with them. I need them, in other words. My solidarity with them is my reason for being. I demand of them, illogically no doubt, that they should behave well, feel cheated if they do not and am comforted if I find one Frenchman, one Englishman, one American or one Arab, Hottentot, Chinaman brave and kindly and true.

The Battle of France had done nothing to change me. I had seen the collapse of the French Army, had been an eyewitness of a nation gone out of its mind with fear, had had to do with officers who had no faith or pride in their country and men who were too frail to stand up to the Germans; but I had found some Frenchmen with whom I would willingly stand on the deck of a sinking ship or with whom I was ready to try again the fortunes of war; it was enough.

I remember very well the first time that I met General de Gaulle and the curious discomfort I felt when he stalked into the room. It was almost like fear. It was certainly mingled with a painfully strong feeling of aversion. He had brought Madame de Gaulle to dine with us *en famille*. A gentle, charming, slight, timid figure, I turned to her with relief, watching De Gaulle out of the corner of my eye, not wanting to look straight at him. I watched him through the evening. His face never showed the slightest change of expression as he talked. No flicker of interest lifted his hooded eyelids. I was fascinated, the novelist came into play, I began to study him.

I had asked B. to describe him and had been puzzled by his difficulty in doing so. As a rule he was good at word portraits. Finally he had said, frowning as if intent on solving a riddle, that he was like a medieval monk, that he saw him in a cassock pushing his long hands up his sleeves. "You know," he had said, "the monks' gesture." Now as I watched De Gaulle I understood B.'s difficulty. I couldn't have described him to myself. It was as if when I looked full at him I saw nothing, nothing but a lifeless figure, wrapped in a palpable coldness that hid him as a damp cloth hides a sculptor's clay.

I met him often during the months that followed and I went on studying him. It was a part of B.'s plan to introduce him to men in London who could be useful to him, and he would dine once or twice a week. I wasn't there often but I would come up sometimes from Aldershot; we would make a party of five or six. General de Gaulle, two or three Englishmen, B. and myself. The dinners were sometimes uncomfortable but always interesting. De Gaulle could be eloquent, he could make himself very agreeable if he felt so inclined. But he was often biting, scathing in his criticisms of England and the English, just as much or more so of France. His long lips would grimace as if he were drinking gall and wormwood when he talked of France.

The bitterness he felt for his own country erupted like poisonous bile from his mouth. Gradually I began to understand—and I think I did understand him in those days—perhaps I do so even now.

I believe pride is the basis of his character. I think he felt the dishonor of France as few men can feel anything, and that he had literally taken on himself the national dishonor, as Christ according to the Christian faith took on himself the sins of the world. I think he was like a man during those days who had been skinned alive, and that the slightest contact with friendly, well-meaning people got him on the raw to such an extent that he wanted to bite, as a dog that has been run over will bite in its agony any would-be friend who comes to its rescue. The discomfort I felt in his presence was due, I am certain, to the boiling misery and hatred inside him.

His one relief, in fact his one pleasure, was to hate. And he hated all the world, but most especially those who tried to be his friends. He had never pretended to like the British, he didn't attempt to conceal his dislike now that he needed them. On the contrary, to be beholden to anyone was in itself hateful. To come to the British as a suppliant, with the disgrace of his nation burned on his forehead and in his heart, was intolerable. But he could look to no one else; his own people failed him; the French officials reviled or snubbed him, the troops turned their backs on him; the response to his appeal was pitiable. The weaker his position the more arrogant he became. Very well, let the British help him. They needed him as much as or more than he needed them. But let there be no pretense of friendliness or sentiment about it. The Prime Minister and General Spears were using him, he would use them. He would wring out of them the arms and equipment he needed, but he wouldn't pretend to be grateful. He wasn't grateful. He hated them for giving him what he had to have. One day he would pay them back.

In the meantime the last thing he wanted was to be on intimate terms with anyone. No one was to be allowed to penetrate his inner privacy or reach his heart. If he was repellent, and he was to me, it was because he wished to repel.

These things about De Gaulle came to me gradually as I watched him and my husband work out their problem. They were a queer pair. And the thing that bound them together was the queerest part of it all—for it was a common outraged love for a country, a nation. De Gaulle was France—literally, in his own eyes, he was his nation. When he spoke for France and in the name of France, he was stating a fact that he wanted desperately to believe to be true, he was uttering a shout of defiance to all the world, daring the world to deny that it was so. He was setting himself up not only

as the symbol of the pride and grandeur of France but as the living proof that France was not conquered and had a right to be proud.

B. loved France as a man loves an adored woman who has disgraced herself. He too felt, though inevitably to a lesser degree, the shame and the hurt. When we talked with De Gaulle of Pétain, Weygand, Baudoin, B.'s lips would twist with the same painful bitterness, and the two would suddenly look strangely alike. Two men bound by a common disappointment, a common sense of outrage, two men forced to drink from a single bitter cup; it was a curious bond. They might quarrel, get on each other's nerves, long to be rid of one another, they couldn't get free. They were in bondage to France. What was going to tear them apart and turn De Gaulle against B. had to be something of more importance to the British soldier than France or her honor. It was. The time came when it was a question with B. of Great Britain's honor as against his feeling for France. There was naturally no choice. It is a queer tale.

### III

But let us go back to the days when they were partners. De Gaulle told me a story one night at dinner in London that provided me with a clue to his state of mind. I asked him what he thought France would be like at the end of the war and he said, "It depends on how long the war lasts. When I was a boy I used to go with my brothers to stay with my grandmother for the holidays. She had a country place in the north of France. The Germans overran it in 1914 and installed a divisional staff in the house. They stayed there four years. Then when the war was over my grandmother asked us to come back again to visit her, and we went. But the house was dirty. The Germans had dirtied it. France will be like that if the war lasts too long."

I like to remember this and one other incident, for it isn't easy to remember De Gaulle, and that is another queer thing about him. I cannot see him at those dinner tables as I see the others. Lord Moyne, for instance, or General Ismay. It is as if his chair were empty. There is only his voice. Now as I think of him, he fades out, becomes a ghost. I see his photographs plastered on a hundred hoardings, framed in a thousand windows, but I cannot see him.

It wasn't his irascible temper nor the raw state of his nerves that puzzled me in the end. I understood all that. It was finally the sense of something wanting in him, the lack of a vital element needed in the make-up of a human being. I would have put him down as quite inhuman but for one glimpse of him. It was Christmas Day in '40. Madame de Gaulle was in Shropshire. De Gaulle had come to the French camp for midnight Mass on

Christmas Eve and hadn't time to join his family, so B. brought him back to our cottage that was near by for Christmas Day. We were alone. Only De Gaulle and ourselves and my boy Michael, who was home from Oxford.

It is a small house, a Tudor farmhouse. De Gaulle looked very big in the low-ceilinged rooms, and it was a rather sad Christmas Day, for all of us. But after lunch De Gaulle talked to Michael. He relaxed, his face softened. He talked to him for an hour about Oxford and the young men of England, and when he went back to London, Michael, who is a very reserved chap, came to me and said, "I would like to serve under General de Gaulle."

#### IV

*"La France a perdue une bataille, elle n'a pas perdue la guerre."*

"France has lost a battle, she has not lost the war."

England was playing host to a very large number of French visitors at a time when she was hard put to it to look after her own, but not many rallied to her side under the banner of General de Gaulle. Out of all the thousands of French soldiers quartered in Britain at the time of the armistice, only one battalion of the Foreign Legion, one of *Chasseurs Alpins* and one company of *Fusiliers Marins* chose to fight on. In addition to these disappointing numbers, other oddments were dribbling in. Gunners, airmen, cavalry officers; a motley collection turned up at Olympia. They had heard De Gaulle's appeal as they retreated across France and had managed to make their escape. We had met a dozen or more on the "Etric," among them Major Fruchaud, a distinguished surgeon from Angers who was to become the *médecin chef* of my new hospital. And as I have said, a goodly crowd of youngsters had got away, students chiefly from round about Rouen. They had been about to go up for their exams when the collapse came and had been warned in time. Some had been taken on board British ships at Cherbourg, others had made their escape in fishing boats. Some were mere children, many were attractive youngsters of good family. There were between six and eight hundred of them at Delville when I moved down there. They were commanded by a Colonel Renouard, who spent the whole war, I believe, in England. The Foreign Legion under Colonel Magrin Verneret, now known as General Montclar, were in Morval barracks next door. He had with him as A.D.C. a very tall, thin, beak-nosed officer called Captain Koenig. Taken all together, soldiers, sailors and airmen, the Free French forces numbered roughly three thousand men at the time of the expedition to Dakar.

## CHAPTER XIV

### I

THE Hadfield-Spears Unit had arrived at Plymouth on the "Etric" from St.-Jean-de-Luz the twenty-seventh of June, 1940. Re-formed and re-equipped it embarked at Glasgow on the "Otranto" on March 24th, '41, for a destination unknown. Seven of the original team volunteered to go with me once again overseas. Barbara Graham, Kit Tatham-Warter, Cynthia Toulmin and Rosie Forbes of the M.T.C. and three nurses, Evelyn Fuhlroth, Nancy Wright and Josie Pearce. To these were added four M.T.C. drivers and five nurses, bringing each group up to eight in the new unit.

Dorea, Maria, Pellew, Jean Williams and Kelsey stayed on with me at Delville and with one exception at Old Dean Camp, Camberley, where we moved with the French troops in November. Jean joined us a year later in Egypt. Kelsey left from Delville with Colonel Fruchaud's light field ambulance on the Dakar expedition and she too came back to us, but only after four years when we had circled the Mediterranean, taken part in five campaigns, Syria, Libya, North Africa, Italy and France, and were within fifty miles of our starting place, St. Jean le Bassel. Maureen Schreiber went with her husband to Lisbon. Pip Scott-Ellis organized a hospital for the Poles with Dodo Annesley and Marjorie Fielden. Boddles joined the W.A.A.F.'s. MacManaway married, the poor Strawberry Queen was killed in a motor accident soon after reaching home; the others drifted away and were lost in the vast army of women mobilized for Britain's total war. I was sorry to lose them. There were several with whom I would gladly have started out again. Boddles had made us laugh and I have made fun of her, gentle fun I hope, for she is a plucky creature who can be counted on in a crisis and will always rise to an occasion as she did on that harassing day when we went to Auxerre. But my great disappointment was that Dorea couldn't come. I needed her. I had come to depend on her as on no one else. I continued to depend on her until the end of the war. During the nine months I spent in England she never left me; after that she was to support me still through thick and thin, but from a distance.

Our lodgings in Camberley were squalid. I had recruited several canteen

workers and Mrs. Cook had sent me a new lot of drivers with cars and Barbara Hawkins as commandant, to drive for the Free French Brigade, so Aldershot Command requisitioned for us a big hideous empty house and furnished it, very largely as I remember with crockery. There were enough china plates for a regiment but very few chairs, our rations were more than adequate, the French army cook was not. I think he was a Corsican. I knew he was violent, for he would erupt every so often into the dining room in pursuit of our serving maid armed with a carving knife. The great trial was the lack of garage accommodation for the cars. They had to stand in the open all winter and the rumpus that went on in the cold weather over emptying radiators at night and warming up engines before daylight when the girls were ordered out on maneuvers was considerable. A noisy house, bleak, draughty, warm in spots, icy in others, with doors banging, feet bringing in snow and mud and pounding up and down stairs, the telephone ringing all day, gramophones going in half a dozen rooms at once, voices calling, quarreling sometimes, laughing most times, not a bad house really. Looking back I see that summer, autumn and winter of '40-'41 as a succession of disordered, uncomfortable days made tolerable by the grim hilarity of the girls, lighted now and then by flashes of fear, for the blitz was on, and dominated by Dorea's good-humored commanding presence.

Hawkins was in command of the drivers, Jean in charge of the camp hospital, but Dorea ran the canteen, our noisy household and me. The thought of going abroad without her was bitter.

## II

We had found faithful Dorothy Van Tets holding the fort at Carlton House Terrace. Sir Robert Hadfield was dying in a country house near Epsom, Lady Hadfield was in her villa in the south of France. It appeared impossible to get her home. Lord Dawson, Sir Robert's physician, his solicitor, Mr. Thomas, Lady Hadfield's secretary and I sent repeated wires. She answered that she couldn't get away but insisted that all was well. She remained at Cap Ferat for two years. We were allowed to go on using the dining room at Carlton House Terrace as an office until Sir Robert's death, then moved to a room in the Carlton Hotel. But there was no question of any financial help from Lady Hadfield in our new venture and we expected none. Nor luckily did we need it. I had sent out a circular letter to my friends in England asking for contributions toward a mobile hospital for the Free French and had had a disappointing response. Leslie Benson came to the rescue. She had just returned from Washington and represented the

British War Relief Society in New York. She rang me up one morning to say that she had had my letter, that there was a large fund in America that had been collected for France and that she didn't see why, now that France was out of the war, I shouldn't have some of it for my Free French hospital. She would cable, she said, and put it to the chairman, Mr. Appleby. The answer came as I remember in less than a week. The British War Relief would finance my unit on condition that I applied to no other committee for assistance. I agreed naturally. They sent me a check for twenty thousand pounds, and our financial worries were over.

But it seemed only fair to Lady Hadfield to keep her name with my own in the new hospital did she wish it. She had made it all possible in the beginning. I wanted to show my gratitude. So we put her the question by telegram, received her enthusiastic approval, and the Hadfield-Spears Unit entered on a new lease of life.

The organization of this my third hospital was identical in principle with the other two, but its make-up was different. I put the same conditions in a letter to General de Gaulle that I had put to Marshal Joffre and General Gamelin, emphasizing once more the Anglo-French character of the unit and my complete control of the *personnel féminin*. General de Gaulle accepted the conditions and embodied them in a *note de service* that was in fact the charter of the hospital, a document of considerable importance to which I was going to be obliged to refer more than once during the years that followed. I had needed no such charter in 1914-1918, nor in 1939-1940. The armies of Marshals Joffre and Foch and of General Gamelin had allowed not the slightest interference with my authority in my own unit, but I needed such a document strangely enough with the forces of General de Gaulle and I must have realized this for in addition to the *note de service* there was an interchange of letters between General de Gaulle and myself making the status of the unit and my own position as *directrice* perfectly clear and these were to prove useful when various people began to show a desire to do my work for me.

Just why I was uneasy in regard to my authority over the *personnel féminin* I do not know. Possibly because Colonel Magrin Verneret had attempted to impose on me a couple of ladies of his acquaintance, perhaps because the whole adventure seemed so uncertain. There was no question of recruiting French nurses, for there was at the time no corps of French nurses in England to draw from. And I needed more men than women. We were going, this time, a very long way and must carry enough tentage to house our entire staff as well as the hospital services and a hundred patients, so what we needed most were heavy trucks and men to drive them who could act as orderlies

when we were deployed. But when I put this to General de Gaulle he answered that with so few troops at his disposal he could not spare men to drive for us or act as orderlies in a hospital, he counted on me to supply them.

Dorothy and I were for a moment nonplused. Where were we to find thirty young men suitable, ready and free to go overseas with a French hospital? The answer was in the U.S.A. on the one hand, among the conscientious objectors of Britain on the other. So we sent an S.O.S. to the American Field Service in New York for drivers and another to the Friends' Ambulance Unit in London for hospital orderlies. Both appeals were answered. The American Field Service would supply a group of drivers, the Friends' Ambulance Unit would find us young men with hospital experience.

We seem to have acted on faith like the early Christians; we had found the men but where were we to find the vehicles, and the tents and all the rest? I remember making my way full of hope into the Transport Section of the War Office and starting out to explain to a kindly major what my idea was. "We must above all," I insisted, "be mobile, that is more important than anything else."

The very benign major lifted a grizzled eyebrow. "Just how," he asked, "do you envisage your unit? Is it to be a field ambulance or a casualty clearing station? Our field ambulances carry no beds, only stretchers. A C.C.S. on the other hand is not mobile. It depends for movement on the transport of the division to which it belongs."

"I want," I answered, "to combine the best points of each. Beds we must have and linen and pillows, the full equipment, in fact, of a C.C.S. of one hundred beds, but we must be able to move anywhere at any time under our own steam. How many trucks will we need?"

We worked it out together, the major and Dorothy and I. Fifteen three-ton Bedford trucks and as many fifteen-hundred-weight would do us, with five Ford V-8's to transport the nurses and officers. Very well, but where were we to get them? I remembered our motley convoy that had trundled its way across France, and my heart sank. To drag the twin of our old Bedford across a desert was unthinkable, to buy desert-worthy trucks in the trade was impossible, there were none to be had. The War Office was our only hope, and the War Office played up. They allowed us to purchase our vehicles, tents, beds, cookers and ward equipment from army stock, and once the permission was granted a dozen officers came to life at the end of Dorothy's telephone, ready and eager to help. Dorothy once more had come into her own. I need not worry about our equipment, blitz or no blitz Dorothy would find and collect what was needed. The question of staff



was more difficult. General de Gaulle's medical service was practically non-existent. Colonel Fruchaud, the one notable surgeon who had rallied to him, was going on ahead. He proposed to join us somewhere at some time, but we couldn't start out without at least a skeleton staff of officers. It took months to find them. I began to feel that the hospital would never take shape but at last a surgeon, Commandant Durbach, was presented to me, he would be our *médecin chef* until we found Fruchaud, then a doctor and doctress, man and wife, Monsieur and Madame Asquins, then another medical man, Captain Jibery, a Breton from Quimper.

Commandant Durbach was square and heavy with a rather handsome but unfriendly face. Dr. Asquins had the look of a fair plump cherub, his wife was a mere wisp of a thing in large spectacles. Captain Jibery's eyes had an enigmatic glitter behind his pince-nez. I was a trifle dismayed at the thought of starting off into the unknown with so many strangers. For it was literally the unknown. When it came to recruiting new nurses and drivers, I couldn't tell them where we were going because I didn't know. Abyssinia? Eritrea? Italian Somaliland? Who could tell? My friends at the War Office talked of the tropics and tropical kit and tropical disease. They were eloquent on the subject of mosquito nets and mosquito boots and quinine, but beyond this they wouldn't go. All I could promise the young women I interviewed was a long journey to some place where we would be very hot, probably get dysentery and malaria but not, if we were prudent and lucky, typhoid, typhus, cholera or bubonic plague.

They were not dismayed, the young women. Mrs. Cook produced a couple of dozen M.T.C. volunteers who were first vetted by T. W. and reduced to twelve, then interviewed by me. It was a difficult business to choose. As I looked into their faces, listened to their voices, I realized what a gamble it was. For this was not like going to France. If I chose wrong and a girl turned out badly I couldn't send her home. The same applied to the nurses. Some who applied were too old, some too young, some didn't look strong. It was all very tricky. Daphne Burnside, M.T.C., was dangerously alluring, but there was something very sweet and good-humored about her. I was right about Daphne. Joy Goode looked sturdy and inspired confidence, she would stay the course; I was wrong, she was married to Mervyn Phipps from my house in the Lebanon four months later. Edith Irving might have a temper but her nursing experience was very great and her giggle very infectious. She might turn up trumps. Right again. She did. I learned to count on Irving. But how could I tell what we were going to come up against and what was an ideal recruit for our adventurous enterprise with a future as vague and uncertain as ours? I didn't know. I could only have answered, "Someone as

balanced and hardheaded as Dorea, someone with a touch of genius and a sense of humor like Barbara, with T. W.'s phlegmatic audacity and Cynthia's pride and Rosie's astringent charm." Well, that quartette was coming, thank God. As long as they were with me, the old spirit of the unit would be kept alive.

### III

General de Gaulle's long shadow lies across the dark landscape of that English summer and winter. I met him frequently but knew him no better. B. left with him for Dakar on the twenty-ninth of August. They were gone three months. Extracts from my inadequate diary recall the atmosphere of that queer time when the sirens were screaming and each livid day revealed new gashes in the London streets.

Aug. 18th, '40. The legion is going abroad. The king has been down to inspect them. De Gaulle and B. in attendance. They looked a fine tough lot, very chic in their white socks. We shall miss them. Colonel Magrin Verneret gave us lunch after the parade. A queer man with a soft voice and snake's eyes. He gives me the creeps. He has a hole in his head, a wound from the last war. You can see the cavity pulsating under the skin. He is always telling me that he is a *tête brûlée* and cannot be expected to behave like an ordinary human being.

Sept. 17th. The invasion was to have been this week end. Van Tets reported on Friday that all shipping had been cleared out of the London docks. This might mean only that the Port of London is untenable but as all leave was stopped and the papers were full of German concentrations on the French coast it looked as if it might really come.

London was horrid yesterday. Lunched at the Carlton Grill. Visited Sylvia Henley at the Euston Canteen, then the White City. The last of the French troops left there for France this morning. Kathleen Queensberry has gone to work in the East End.

I don't think I am frightened. A slight but very slight reluctance to go to the Euston Canteen. Sylvia perfectly calm on her top floor with wrecked buildings all around the place and Euston Station, the target, a couple of hundred yards away.

I find it no great effort to carry on during a bombardment, but then I'm not short of sleep like people in offices in London. Delusions help. One, that speeding through the streets you will miss the damn things.

But London under bombardment strikes the imagination. A great beast, peaceable, good-natured, chained down, wounded again and again,

roaring, showing its teeth, but unable to leap up, get to grips with its swarming attackers.

Sept. 20th. Was to have met Lavinia at Punch's Club for lunch but it disappeared in the night. Went to East End yesterday. Barbara driving. All my M.T.C. girls have volunteered to do a week at a time in Mile End with Kathleen Queensbery. The northwest corner of Berkeley Square is gone, fine house disemboweled, a piece of red stair carpet waving in the wind from what is left of an upstairs landing.

Oct. 15th. Am just beginning to realize that we are living in a world where everything dreadful that we put from us saying, "That couldn't happen," is more than likely to happen, such as being killed with one's soup spoon in one's mouth. Leslie Benson came over from Windsor, she said, "I no longer know whether a thing has happened or whether I dreamt it."

Was interrupted by phone to be told there had been damage at Strathearn Place and hurried up to London. The two houses next to ours in Hyde Park Square are gone. Big bits of them crashed on to us. All our windows are blown out by blast—ceiling in my bedroom has fallen on my bed. There seems to be a biggish hole in the roof. Very dirty and dismal with the rain coming in, rivulets of mud running down the stairs. But there was a kind of poetry about the desolation, the eloquence of trivial objects, contents of cupboards strewn about, whitish dust inches deep over everything, like ashes, and the view from the stair landing is like the last days of Pompeii. I remember dinner with B. in the dining room—lighted candles on the table. The plates in the pantry cupboard came from Strasbourg. Many are broken. They were made in the factory we visited at Sargemines. Now they are bombed in London.

Dec. 18th. Impossible to keep this diary up to date. B. came back a fortnight ago. Dakar seems to have been a heartbreaking business. But Koenig made a fine job of Libreville. Magrin Verneret would not take command as he refuses to fight other Frenchmen so Koenig conducted the operations.

The news from Greece and our offensive in the Western Desert dwarfs everything else. My little affairs are being complicated by being bombed out of the Carlton Hotel, but my luck holds. I slept at Strathearn Place the night before the bombing—same thing at the Carlton. Had been using the bedroom next to our office when in London—missed trouble by one night.

Dec. 28th. Eve Curie lunched with us today. B. was very impressed with her at Bordeaux. They talked of France, naturally, of Pétain, Weygand,

Huntzinger and De Gaulle. She feels that Pétain is doing his best to resist. She is anxious that De Gaulle should be identified with French resistance inside France. B. believes Huntzinger to be the best of the Vichy lot. She is a curiously fascinating creature with a remarkably brave and lucid mind.

Jan. 8th. De Gaulle and Lord Cranbourne dined last night at the Ritz. De Gaulle talked of mechanical warfare. "*Les masses*," he said, "*ne se battent plus*." I asked how many armored divisions he considered necessary to defeat Germany. He said twenty-five and added that it was in the British genius to develop such a mobile fighting force to perfection, as a champion polo team. "Then there need be," I said, "no wholesale massacre." He answered, "Not on the battlefield. *Mais la nature se venge toujours. Il y aura des massacres; des morts de faim, des épidémies.*"

Our organization is almost complete in spite of setbacks. Dorothy told me this morning that we've lost all our hospital linen and blankets. They were lying in store in the city. The warehouse was destroyed yesterday.

Jan. 27th. Weeks go by and I write down nothing. Why? I know that the plain record of my days would be strange to read afterwards. Perhaps I don't believe that there will be an afterwards for me. Or it may be that any mental effort beyond that of coping with problems of getting enough cakes to satisfy our French youngsters is beyond me. The war is certainly stupefying. There is the need, too, of not thinking ahead. Had the horrors last night when we dined with General le Gentilhomme. The talk turned on water trucks. We hadn't thought of them until the other day. We must carry enough water, he says, to last us five days at the rate of two gallons per man per day. Estimating for 100 patients and 100 staff—that means 2000 gallons, and water trucks only hold 230 gallons each. We can't afford eight trucks. Our money will just run to four. But one of Dorothy's keenest supporters at the W.O. has sent six to our depot at Woking. Leslie says to keep the lot and trust to Mr. Appleby in New York to come across with the money. "It would be dreadful," she said, "if you were stranded." The gravity of her sweet face didn't seem to me to refer to any reality. The idea that we might die of thirst if we don't have the trucks doesn't make sense to me. But the photos of Abyssinia gave me the pip. The back of beyond stared from the glossy prints. Do I find the mountains of Abyssinia beautiful? No. Not I. A voice inside me began whispering. "You can't do it. What has impelled you to let yourself in for this?"

I don't know the answer. Vanity, curiosity, sense of adventure, the will to keep young, defy time, distance, all these vague discreditable

reasons come into it and muddle up the decent impulse to do what one can in this bloody war. Now, whatever I feel, I'm in for it and couldn't back out if I wanted to.

## IV

Darkness and mud, rain and snow and a bedraggled crowd of French youngsters floundering through the stormy dark to our draughty canteen. Dorea, Barbara and Oscar Cachera, our stalwart French orderly, drawing beer from casks under the counter. Maria in charge of the milk bar, Cynthia and Rosie selling razor blades, shoelaces, chocolates and cigarettes—myself behind mountains of cakes that melt into the curly mouths of the children who have come from Rouen and Beauvais and Paris to shiver through an English winter and try to learn to fight for a country that has willed not to fight any more.

I was very sorry for them. They were innocent, these youngsters. They had no *arrière-pensée*, had not rallied to General de Gaulle for ignoble reasons as some seemed to have done. Sometimes they would come up to the cake counter and look into my face with wide unhappy eyes and say in desperate childlike earnest, "*Il faut soulever la France*. Will you help us? We have confidence in you." And I would be reassured.

I needed to be reassured. There were days when I asked myself if I had a right to take these girls abroad with such a confused and heterogeneous force. It wasn't so much the fact that the band of magnificent madmen who had rallied to De Gaulle appeared on closer acquaintance neither quite as magnificent nor as mad as I thought, it was rather a feeling of incoherence in the whole force. The legion had gone and didn't return. The youngsters were being trained to be *Chasseurs Alpins*. Colonel Renouard, who was camp commandant, spent most of his time in London and Colonel Cazou, who had turned up to command the troops, spent much of his time playing bridge, and save for the boys in training there seemed to be almost no Frenchmen in the ranks. There had been every nationality in the legion, here there were Gooms, there were blacks, but of French fighting troops there seemed to be almost none.

And what of France? What was going on there? No one knew. There was some coming and going. Occasionally one of our young companions would disappear and come back. Sometimes he didn't come back. If he did, his news was secret and not to be told, but one could gather from the look on his face that it wasn't reassuring.

They weren't happy, these men. How could they be? I didn't understand

then what I know now, that added to their sense of strangeness was a feeling that perhaps they had been traitors to France in joining De Gaulle and the British. Pierre Bourdan makes the point in his book *Les Jours d'Attente* and I am sure that it was true of some of the young men in Camberley. I couldn't have thought of this at the time. I was sorry for them but I thought they were at least buoyed up by the conviction that they were acting as loyal Frenchmen. I assumed that they were animated by the same passionate fanaticism that inspired De Gaulle. I don't think they were. I believe they were torn at times by doubt of the rightness of their cause, and my impression is that De Gaulle himself did little to help them. He remained aloof. He seemed to make no friends among them, and to want no friends.

I would go up to London and find B. in the throes of some new crisis with the F.O. or the Admiralty or the Ministry of Shipping. De Gaulle had moved his H.Q. to Carlton Gardens and the Spears Mission was installed in Gwydder House, Whitehall, opposite the Admiralty. It had become a huge affair with members attached to it from every government department. Colonel Archdale of the W.O. was in charge of the military section with which I had most to do. Major Burton was his second. Michael Knox (a captain in those days) divided his time between the mission and Camberley. George Mercer-Nairn had gone to Dakar and had stayed on in Africa. There were many others, all heart and soul in the Free French movement, but Michael Knox was possibly the greatest enthusiast of the lot. I was to find him in Cairo, in Libya, in North Africa, fighting the British on behalf of De Gaulle as B. had been doing in London since the beginning.

I would wait downstairs for a chance to speak to my husband and be ushered at last into his office only to be bundled out again two minutes later.

General Catroux was expected. He had arrived from Indo-China. Indo-China took its orders from Vichy and was prepared to receive the Japs. So General Catroux, who was not prepared to receive the Japs, had left with Madame Catroux. We the British had brought them back. It was awkward. General Catroux was a five-star general and had been governor general in Indo-China. It would be difficult for him to serve under General de Gaulle. He was due now. He had met De Gaulle that morning for the first time. I must vanish. General Catroux was announced. I had a momentary impression of a small spare man with mournful eyes before I withdrew.

I was always being bundled out. If not for Catroux, for Muselier or Le Gentilhomme, who had been whisked back from Djibouti, or someone.

I would seize my moment and ask B. my question. Did he really believe I was right in going on with this business?

What? B. would stare uncomprehending, then before I could answer go back to his papers, ring for his secretary, or Colonel Archdale would come in with some problem of equipment, or someone would come through on the phone, and I would be given the great treat of listening to one side of a row.

"God Almighty, what do they think we are trying to do? What? No shipping space? Until when? You know as well as I do that that's no good. Our own people? I know, I've heard that before. But certainly, every time. No. I won't, you can tell them that's final. Christ, what a mess."

Did he, I would repeat when there was a moment's lull, really think I should take this new hospital overseas with the Free French?

His answer was always the same. As far as the hospital was concerned I must do as I liked. He didn't want me to go but it was for me to decide. He himself held to what he had said when I first got back. The result of the recruiting among the French troops in England was lamentable. That made no difference. As a fighting force the Free French were negligible. No matter. He held to his belief that our only hope of keeping the French nation from coming in against us was to have a French force, however small, fighting with us.

I think now that he was mistaken. From what I have learned since we re-entered France, my impression is that the resistance movement inside France did not draw its inspiration from General de Gaulle and the Free French forces. Its impetus came from the Germans, its inspiration from the British. It was our British news, listened to secretly by ten thousand families, that kept the flame burning.

B. right or wrong was convinced, and he convinced me. He had staked everything on De Gaulle and would stick to him, so it seemed then, until France was liberated. I would go back to our sordid lodgings in Camberley determined to do the same and would find Dorea, Barbara, T. W., Rosie and Cynthia huddled over the fire. Someone would produce a bottle of gin. Half an hour later we would flounder through the dark to the canteen.

Mud and more mud, then snow and a biting bitter wind sweeping the camp, and the cities of Britain shaking under the German bombardment, and all the young manhood of Britain in training camps like ours, and the telephone ringing in the canteen or the mess and voices calling out of the dark and the distance, voices of young men who had once upon a time danced in London ballrooms with these girls of mine and were now scattered over the country waiting to go overseas. How strange they sounded, those far-away voices, so small, so urgent, so wistful. Could Cynthia come up for the evening? Could Rosie? "A spot of leave," the voice said. "A jolly evening.

Couldn't they come? Where? When? Where are you? Are you there?—Hallo—Are you there?" Air raid warning purple. Air raid warning red. The voice was gone. The raid was on. Almost all the voices are silent now.

And at last I wrote in my diary on February 8, 1941:

The hospital equipment has gone. The convoy left on Monday morning at 8:30 for Penarth, Cardiff, where the stuff is to be loaded on to a tramp steamer. It, the convoy, took up two and a half miles of road, quite impressive. De Gaulle inspected the unit last week in a bitter cold fog. If he was pleased he didn't show it. But our forty vehicles made a very good effect. The boys had smartened themselves up and Le Gentilhomme at least was delighted.

Very cold when they left for Wales. Parceled out my warm combinations among the girls who drove the six water buggies. The convoy went wrong in Cheltenham as the D.R. didn't turn up. But they got to their destination eventually, came back by train to Reading and as the bus sent by Aldershot to fetch them got lost, they didn't turn up till 3:30 A.M. but were quite recovered by lunch time. They have scattered now until the 20th. But Major Knox has learned from the W.O. that we shan't leave till next month so I must make new arrangements.

This waiting for a ship is most exasperating. If we don't get off until March, if the fighting is all over in East Africa, what do we do? Our equipment has gone to Port Sudan. How could we be switched back? Benghazi fell yesterday. We've occupied half Eritrea already. Abyssinia surely can't hold out another three months. Perhaps we'll be sent to Greece—Salonika—God knows.

B. is going abroad again, with General de Gaulle. A quick trip, by air to West Africa, then across by way of the Chad. This is all I know. He is so afraid I will chatter that he tells me nothing.

March 15th, '41. We leave on Thursday 20th. A series of pink papers marked secret contain our instructions. B. has gone. He and De Gaulle left the day before yesterday by motor to Southampton to get their plane, then came back. Am grateful for the extra time with him. The anguish of the first good-by couldn't be repeated. One can't suffer beyond a given point—so we were comparatively cheerful. I said it was a good omen, that he would surely turn up wherever I was when I had given up expecting him.

But he and De Gaulle only mean to be gone six weeks. So they will probably be on their way home by the time we get to Port Sudan.



## CHAPTER XV

### I

THERE are some little brown nuns in a place called Deraa in Syria. They are Christian Arabs and they are very poor, modest and gentle. Their faces are darkened by the burning sun that beats down on their dry stony land, and their black robes are often powdered with yellow dust. They do not belong to a great order like the Sisters of Providence in St. Jean le Bassel, but like them they keep a school, and they opened its gates to us and took us in with our loaded trucks and our noisy French, British and American staff. We filled their school with our wounded and their washhouse with our bloodstained linen. We parked our trucks and put up our tents in their scorched fields. We brought bombs in our wake and airplanes that machine-gunned our tents each morning and blood and pain and death, and they helped us unceasingly during the three weeks that we spent with them, even when they were very frightened.

Deraa isn't much of a place. It lies in the desert on the edge of the Jebel Druse just inside the Syrian frontier. If you take the road from Jerusalem to Damascus via Nablus and cross the Jordan Valley at Beisan you will pass through it but you won't be tempted to stop; it holds nothing of interest for travelers nor any obvious beauty. The Arab town on the plateau to the south of the deep wadi is beautiful in the evening when the mud walls of its flat-roofed houses turn from biscuit color to apricot and salmon pink, but the European quarter on the north side of the wadi is ugly. It has one long street lined with low square stone houses and on either side of the street is the flat desert.

It was the eighth of June and very hot when we arrived. We had moved up in convoy with the Free French troops from Palestine spending two nights on the road. The khamsin was blowing like a wind out of a furnace, clouds of yellow dust were rolling down the street to envelop the ugly houses, the few starved trees and the straggling troops in billows of yellow fog and the windshields of our cars were thick with flies. There were flies everywhere, myriads and myriads of flies.

We knew that we were to set up the hospital in Deraa, but where?

Every house seemed to be occupied by troops. The street and the desert coming up between the houses to the edge of the street were filled with army trucks. We had parked our lorries to one side and were waiting for orders when I saw a little creature trotting toward us against the wind. She was evidently a nun. She wore a long heavy black dress of some woollen stuff and a limp white kerchief bound round her head. Her face was withered and lined, she had gentle eyes; she smiled as she came up to me and spoke in French.

"You are an ambulance unit, madame?"

"Yes, my mother."

"You seek a place for your hospital?"

"We do."

"Then you are welcome to our school, it is empty, all our pupils have gone home because of the war."

I presented Commandant Durbach, and she bowed clasping her eager brown hands together.

"Will you not make use of my school, *Monsieur le Commandant*, I have five sisters with me and we would like to be of service. It is not a big building but there is a shed and an outhouse. Come," she said, "I will show you."

So Durbach and I followed her down the street and turned into her gate. There were two gates and a drive up to the front door. The low school building formed three sides of a square. There was room for many ambulances in the dusty courtyard. With sufficient crowding we could perhaps get our hundred beds into the classrooms. The outhouse would do for an operating room and the shed next to it, near the gate, for resuscitation and reception; we could live in our tents in the adjoining field.

"And there is water," she said, with a proud lift of the head. "Look, here is our well. It is good sweet water. Ours is the only well left in Deraa. They blew up the others."

I looked into her small worn face.

"And how is it, my Mother, that they spared your well?"

She gave a little laugh. "When the officer came, the captain who commanded here, to blow up our well, I sat down on the top of it and said, 'If you blow up my well you blow me up with it,' so he went away." And she laughed again as pleased and proud as a child.

"Was he a very tall fair man?" I asked.

"Yes, he was tall."

I looked at Durbach, he nodded.

"He is a prisoner now, my Mother. He was wounded and brought to our camp in Irbid last night."

Her face was distressed for a moment, then she gave a defiant toss of the head and said, "He would have left us to die of thirst."

I have wondered since what the nuns of Deraa thought of it all when they found themselves caught between two opposing French forces. They belonged to the parish of the curé of Suedia. It was he who gave me news of them long after when I met him at lunch with Colonel Oliva-Roget, French delegate at the time in the Jebel Druse. Oliva-Roget had been in Syria for many years. It was only after the battle for Damascus was won that he joined the Free French. Did the nuns secretly take sides? Did they pass silent judgment on these blood brothers who were fighting each other, or ask the curé what lay behind it all? I don't think so. I don't believe they understood anything about politics or had the least wish to understand. They withdrew to their own modest quarters at the back of the school, letting us do as we liked with the building, even giving up to us the Mother's little sitting room by the front door. General le Gentilhomme was nursed in it and Jack Hasey, the American of the Foreign Legion who was shot through the throat, and other desperately wounded officers, and we wrought havoc in the schoolrooms. We filled them with the horrid refuse of shattered bodies. We had to spread all the paraphernalia of nursing out on the verandas. Long trestle tables piled with drums of sterile dressings, and bandages, medicine bottles, baskets of clean linen, others of dirty linen, baskets of salines in cartons, bedpans, urinals. It was impossible to keep bedpans out of sight. There was no place to put them, save on the veranda, to greet De Gaulle when he came or Catroux. Why not? What did elegance matter in the violent press of work, in the frenzied effort to save men's lives.

The nuns would come each morning to collect our hideous sheets. I would find them at all hours of the day on their back porch, bending their slender forms over crimsoned washtubs or spreading clean linen in the sun, but they never asked me why it was that we had come with our motley force of Indian and British and French troops to bring war to their country. And though many very important personages came to visit our patients, including General Wilson and General de Gaulle and General Catroux (even General Wavell himself stopped one day at the gate to wish us well), the diminutive Mother Superior of Deraa has a place all her own in my memory of the Syrian campaign, for she was innocent and without guile, she was an Arab who loved the Lord Jesus Christ and His Blessed Mother and her heart was full of loving compassion for all men in the midst of a fratricidal battle of great bitterness and fury and hatred.

For the fighting in Syria was a horrid business for the Free French

Brigade, and I fancy the British who were responsible for launching the Free French against the Vichy troops realize now that it was a mistake. Whether it was General de Gaulle's idea to begin with or General Wavell's I do not know. I had a worm's not a bird's eye view of the affair from the Free French side, I only saw what I saw and heard what I heard as a nurse in the Free French forces, was involved deeply, intimately in the drama, in a hundred dramas, as I prepared the bodies of Frenchmen shot by other Frenchmen for the operating table, but my horizon was bounded by the pain and rage of the men we looked after.

I know that for most of the French who fought with us for Damascus the whole campaign, like the armistice at the end of it, was a bitter disappointment. Some put a brave face on it, pretended to take it lightly. De Chevigny swaggered into our reception hut, his black poodle at his heels, and said gaily, "I've a little bullet in my belly, take it out quickly please, I must be back with my men tomorrow." And General le Gentilhomme when he was brought to us with a fractured arm seemed to be content with the way things were going, but to our grizzled legionnaires as to most of our French wounded it was a case for the gnashing of teeth, for there was a battalion of the legion fighting on the other side.

When I call to mind those suffocating, fly-infected schoolrooms smelling of blood and gangrene and sweat and disinfectant, the beds crowded so close together that the stretcher bearers could pass in and out only with the greatest difficulty, I feel again, not the physical suffering of the men's mangled bodies—that I was used to, it was an old story—but the festering pain of their minds. And as they tossed and writhed in their beds, as they raved in delirium, as they died, I know that one thought tormented many, namely, that this had been done to them by their own people.

Just why they had expected a different reception it is difficult to say. Who or what had misled them into believing that the French Army in Syria would refuse to fight against them I do not know. B. didn't talk of such things when he came to see me. They were secret matters and not for my ears. What I had heard was the excited talk of junior French officers in Castina camp. Judging from the rumors flying round the brigade, a man called Collet was the key to the situation. For days before we took the road we kept hearing about Colonel Collet and his Cherkess horsemen. Collet it appeared had been in Syria for years. He had stayed on under Mittelhauser after the armistice. But now he was ready to come over to us and bring his cavalry with him. He had been in touch with De Gaulle. He held Syria in his hands.

Wishful thinking? The blind conviction of men on fire with the right-

ness of the cause that their kinsmen must feel as they did in spite of all proof to the contrary? De Gaulle presumably shared the belief as did the high British command. Why else should the Free French Brigade have joined in the campaign, and the conduct of operation on the Damascus front been placed in the hands of General le Gentilhomme? The facts of the case gave a plain answer. The British were counting on the Free French to swing the Vichy French troops over to us. No secret information was needed to understand that. But when Colonel Collet did cross the frontier with only five hundred men, the disappointment among the British was evident but his arrival was hailed by the Free French with desperate triumph.

We heard of it at Irbid. Only five hundred men? No matter, our French friends declared, the rest would come along once we moved on Damascus. Anything else was unthinkable. Stand by Vichy when Vichy had allowed the Germans to use the airdromes of Mezzé and Rayak? The thing was impossible. Why the regiments over there on the other side were full of friends, brother officers with whom they had been at St. Cyr. Once they could get in touch with them, everything would be different, we would see; the whole French force of thirty-eight thousand officers and men were only waiting for the chance to join us. The faces of our young friends were alight as they talked; they laughed, they almost cried with excitement. But Koenig, passing our convoy in his small open car, looked grim. And De Gaulle? Who will ever know what De Gaulle was feeling at that crucial hour?

## II

We had reached Suez on the second of May expecting to be shipped back to Port Sudan and to proceed to Abyssinia, but much had happened during the six weeks that we had been at sea, and the war in the Middle East had entered on a new phase. Things had gone well in East Africa. We had regained British Somaliland toward the end of March, had occupied Addis Ababa during the first week of April, the Eritrean campaign was over, but the Axis was having things pretty much their own way everywhere else. The Germans had swept through the Balkans occupying Salonika on the ninth of April, Belgrade on the thirteenth and Athens on the twenty-seventh. A bad month, April, '41. We had spent it very enjoyably on board ship. The war in Greece was lost while we lazed on deck, met before dinner for cocktails, danced and played bridge after, or gazed at the indifferent moon and stars from the boat deck. The evacuation of our forces from Greece was completed as the "Otranto" sailed up the Red Sea. General Fryberg was

in Crete with his New Zealand Division, awaiting the battle that was to cost him so dear and the long dingdong struggle in the Western Desert had been going against us all the month. We had evacuated Benghazi on the third and by the twenty-sixth the Axis forces had crossed the Egyptian frontier at Solum. The siege of Tobruk had begun.

Immediately the ship anchored an officer of the Spears Mission came aboard to tell me that B. was in Cairo, that I was to join him for two days at the British Embassy then rejoin the unit and take it to Palestine. He was followed by Colonel Fruchaud, who had come up from Eritrea, and Mr. Stokes of the American Field Service recently arrived with fifteen drivers from New York. Stokes told me that our hospital equipment had been safely disembarked at Port Said and that one of my own cars was awaiting me on the quay.

To find B. in Cairo when I had been persuaded that he would have left for England with General de Gaulle before I arrived, to find the trucks we had motored to Wales in February safe at Port Said and one of our Ford V8's with an American Field Service driver from New York awaiting me on the quay was breath-taking. I was whisked off the ship, whirled up to Cairo, spent two days with B. at the British Embassy—the Lampsons were old friends and very kind—began to feel very ill (was it the heat?), called on Madame Catroux, lunched with General Wavell, tried to find out what was going to happen to my unit, began to be worried by a flaming sore spot on my shoulder, said good-by to B., was whirled back to Suez and proceeded with the unit to Palestine by train in a daze of heat and pain, to find myself in bed next day with an outsize carbuncle on my shoulder and a high temperature in No. 12 General Hospital in Sarafand. And there I stayed for four long weeks.

A bad moment to choose in which to be laid up. The unit was quartered near me in Sarafand, the French Brigade in Castina camp twenty miles to the south. Barbara had to take charge, establish liaison with brigade headquarters and keep the unit together. But it wasn't yet a unit.

Could one hope, I would ask Barbara as she sat by my bed in No. 12 General Hospital, that our wild young millionaires from New York would make friends with our mild British conscientious objectors? No, one could not. And what of the girls? Well, the girls were having a very good time. The "Nannies" had acquired any number of chaps, there was a swimming club at Jaffa, there were horses to ride. And the new French officers who had joined us at Suez and the two French nurses, Thérèse and Giselle, whom I had chaperoned on the ship and who were still with us? What were they doing? Barbara didn't know. The French spent most of their time at

Castina. She didn't see much of them. Nor did I. Commandant Durbach did not come to see me in hospital, Jibery came I think, I'm not sure. Madame Asquins one day brought me some jonquils, but Fruchaud was the only one who showed any real interest in my welfare. He would come each day to ask after my health and discuss the affairs of the unit.

A strange swarthy man, heavy jowled, hot tempered, moody and very restless, he proved to be nearly as quarrelsome and intolerant as Gosset, but to me during the year and a half of our association his attitude was faultless. For he was a man of the world as well as a distinguished surgeon, he had many friends in England, was at home in our great London hospitals and was entirely free from the resentment that with so many lesser Frenchmen amounted almost to a mental disease at this time. He had moreover an active, enthusiastic mind, a great love of music and an insatiable curiosity for things historical. His sight-seeing expeditions in Palestine, Syria and the Jebel Druse were to become a feature of our life in the north. He could run Daphne off her long legs, reduce even T. W. to breathless exasperation, trekking across rugged wastes and scrambling over ruins. He could be in fact, and often was, a delightful companion but he wasn't happy at Sarafand. He would sit silent, his legged legs crossed, his face lowering; he appeared to be hiding something. What did it mean? I was afraid that I knew. When I had called on Madame Catroux she had said a surprising thing to me. "I find it intolerable," she had said, "that English nurses should be allowed to nurse our dear wounded."

"*Nos chers blessés*" was the phrase. I was to hear it often and I was to become well acquainted with the possessive jealousy of the French Red Cross ladies and the French doctors like Durbach for their wounded. We were going to be obliged to take it into serious account in our hospital but when Madame Catroux came out with it, I was surprised.

I came to know Margot Catroux so well and have seen her in so many of her innumerable moods and manifestations that my first impression has been overlaid with a hundred others, but I recall an effect of flurry and nervousness of uncontrolled and unco-ordinated impulses, of sharp eyes and over-gracious gestures, tactless remarks and radiant smiles. A chaotic creature but full of vitality, not without charm and perhaps warmhearted.

I thought of all the thousands of French wounded from Narvik and Dunkirk who had been nursed in our British hospitals. I thought of Delville and Camberley and St. Jean le Bassel and decided to leave my answer unsaid. What she wanted was to persuade me to take on some of the French women in Egypt as nurses. Her way of setting about it hadn't been tactful; no matter. She had had great experience in the Red Cross, she was head-

strong, impatient, unoccupied, she itched to get her hands on my hospital. I guessed at this while we continued to sip our tea. But I had been warned, I must not quarrel with Madame Catroux, so for the moment I avoided the issue. I was not at all unwilling, I said, to employ French women if they were fully qualified and would accept our English methods. I already had two. We needed no more at present. Later perhaps. We parted amicably to meet again, she assured me, quite soon. There was a determined gleam in her eye.

Thinking back to this interview in Sarafand, connecting it in my mind with the attitude of Commandant Durbach, I was worried and miserable.

If the French didn't want us, if they resented our being here, then why had we come and how could we remain? Suppose I were to withdraw, take my nurses and the F.A.U. and transfer the lot to a British hospital? But Madame Catroux had no proper corps of French nurses available. General de Gaulle had been unable to supply even drivers and orderlies. The hospital would break up. And I had signed a contract with General de Gaulle, spent twenty thousand pounds' worth of American dollars on our equipment, brought all these girls thousands of miles, and B. was devoting himself heart and soul to De Gaulle in Cairo as he had done in London, was fighting the British authorities in the Middle East on his behalf, just as in Whitehall. No, it was impossible to turn back.

General le Gentilhomme was consoling. A dear little man. He came to see me several times, and Koenig, fresh from the Eritrean campaign with five stripes now on his sleeve. I liked Koenig. I believed in him. "One must be a little mad," he said, "to be Free French," and he laughed his sour, cackling laugh. Then other friends began to emerge from Castina. Pierre Duro and De Serigny and Morel who had gone to Dakar. And at last B. came to say good-by.

He had been to Jerusalem with General de Gaulle to see General Wilson. They were flying home in a day or two. There was trouble he said with the British authorities over my hospital. The British didn't want us to go into Syria with the Free French Brigade. Their idea when a battle was pending was to move their hospitals back out of the way. But Le Gentilhomme was fighting for us. I mustn't worry.

We said good-by. I was very sorry for myself when he'd gone. A week later, he was back again, all his plans changed. I must have said good-by to him half a dozen times during that miserable period. At last it came to an end. Le Gentilhomme had had his way. On the sixth of June I climbed into my Ford with a fat bandage making a lump on my shoulder and we took the road with the French column, Barbara driving me.



"Do you know what day it is, May?"

"Yes, the sixth of June."

"Mean anything to you?"

I thought a moment, then it came to me. On the sixth of last June we had begun our retreat across France.

"We're not retreating this time."

"No."

### III

A new convoy much handsomer than the old lumbering motley collection that had wound its way through the Auvergne hills was taking the road again, and a new Hadfield-Spears Unit was starting out on a new adventure. Where would it take us? How far were we going? That we would travel 150,000 miles and take part in four campaigns before we reached home was not revealed to me. I was excited, yes, but filled with misgiving. True, our trucks were all new, but so was the major part of the staff, and Fruchaud wasn't with us. He had gone down with a sharp attack of asthma, would join us as soon as possible; Durbach in the meantime was *médecin chef*.

"Cheer up, May. Once we get to work we'll be all right."

The khamsin caught us at Beisan where we spent the night in the open. It swept us on next day to Irbid, and at Irbid we were ordered to open up but when we got to Irbid all the desert was full of trucks and guns and a great confusion of French, and Indian troops, and we didn't know where to go. So I asked a British officer but he only waved his arm at the horizon and shouted through the wind. "Out there, anywhere, the desert is yours." So we moved on and presently a small pick-up bounced toward us with a big grinning man in it and he called, "Follow me," and turned round and we followed him to a distant water point thinking he had been sent by the command to guide us, but the truth was that he had caught sight of Daphne's golden curls and Rosie's little nose and had acted on his own, thinking it would be pleasant to have these girls as neighbors. It was the kind of thing that was going to happen often during our long trek through the deserts.

We had great difficulty in putting up our tents for the khamsin was blowing a gale and there was no shelter anywhere, only miles and miles of flat burning wind-swept sand and stone. But we managed to get the operating tent ready and a ward of thirty beds in a couple of hours and at sundown we received our first casualty of the Syrian campaign, the commandant of Deraa, who had wanted to blow up the nuns' well.

He had a slight wound in his arm and he stalked into our camp with a

cold supercilious sneer on his thin white face. A very smart figure in his sky-blue tunic and red breeches, but out of another age and another world. And with his arrival the painful drama began that was to involve me inextricably in the fate of the Free French forces. For the scene that took place on that scorched wind-swept plain by those flapping tents made me hot with pity and shame. I had been disappointed with many of the French officers in Aldershot. I had been doubtful of the whole ragged band that had rallied to De Gaulle, but now I was one of them, now I could remember only one thing. They were with us; this man and his lot were against us; and we were at war.

Our officers received him with pathetic friendliness. He met their friendliness with a stony stare. Durbach took him into the operating tent and dressed his wound, then invited him to dine with them in their mess. It was nothing more than a trestle table out in the open but it was nevertheless their mess (we had had no time to put up a mess tent) and he accepted their invitation coldly and sat with them in silence sharing their bully beef stew, and after the meal Dr. Jibery brought him to the ward to go to bed. And because I felt that I must take my cue from Durbach I was very polite, gave him pajamas, soap and towel and a toothbrush and led him to a bed made up with clean sheets and left him, for other wounded were arriving.

Fuhlroth, who was on night duty, came to me later in a rage. "I won't have that officer in my ward," she cried. "He's a prisoner, isn't he? Then why isn't he treated like one? If Durbach thinks it's any good being nice to him he ought to hear him talk to the other wounded—ours I mean. He thinks I don't understand French and he's been trying to upset our men ever since he came in, calling them all sorts of names, traitors, cowards, *saligauds*, whatever that means. I'm sure *saligaud* isn't a nice word, is it? But he used it to describe General de Gaulle. I heard him."

There had been a battle for Deraa, and we had taken some dozen Vichy French officers prisoner with I don't know how many other ranks. I only saw the officers. They had been herded together in the fort of Irbid that was occupied by the Trans-Jordan Frontier Force and a British officer of the VIIIth Hussars seconded to the Frontier Force came to get me next morning to act as interpreter. I went with him across the five miles of desert to the fort and found a group of sullen Frenchmen behind barbed wire with their tin trunks and haversacks piled round them on the ground. I didn't like talking to them. The idea that these men who had been fighting us and their blood brothers a few hours before would forgive and make friends had ceased to make sense to me. It never made sense again, neither that day nor the next, nor at any time during and after that bitter campaign. But it was

the idea, no doubt about that. For General Catroux drove up to the fort at Irbid while I was there. He had come to reason with the Vichy officers in their wire cage. He had come hoping to persuade these gentlemen in scarlet and sky blue to transfer their allegiance from Marshal Pétain and General Huntzinger, who had ordered them to resist the British, to General de Gaulle, whose forces with the British had defeated them in battle the day before.

I felt very uncomfortable when General Catroux stepped inside the barbed wire. I excused myself. I was glad to get away. This, I said to myself, was no business of mine. But I knew that wasn't true.

I drove back miserably through the glaring sun and wind to find our tents coming down. Orders had arrived, Durbach said, to move up to Deraa.

There was an ambulance standing by with an Indian driver, and an Indian medical colonel was talking to our prisoner who stood by the ambulance, very pale, very arrogant, with his arm in a sling. Our officers were watching from a distance, they looked glum.

"What's up?" I asked Durbach.

"He won't give his parole so he's being sent to a prison camp."

"What did you expect?"

Durbach stared, scowled, muttered something under his breath and stalked away.

#### IV

We were too busy in Deraa, once the battle for Damascus was on, to worry about the way it was going. I have the vaguest notion as to which British units were involved. I know that two Indian regiments took part under Brigadier Lloyd, that a battalion of Royal Fusiliers were caught at Kenetra to the west of us; and that our old friend Magrin Verneret refused once again to lead the legion against the forces of Vichy and remained idle in Deraa throughout the fighting, to the annoyance of Colonel Wright, who was in command of the station. But I couldn't describe the military operations if I wished to. The conduct of the troops wasn't my business, my business was to look after the wounded. They came with a rush. During the three weeks' fighting we received six hundred serious surgical cases, French, British and Indian.

Fruchaud's light field ambulance was ahead of us at Sheikmeskin. Its title was *Ambulance Chirurgicale Légère* but it was known as the A.C.L. and I shall call it that. It was the only other field hospital belonging to the French and we were often alongside it. He had handed it over to a colonial surgeon, Commandant Vernier, when he joined me at Sucz. My former nurse Kelsey

was with it and it did a magnificent job in conditions much worse than ours. The Indians had a dressing station in Deraa but were not equipped to do operations while the British, thanks to the precautions of the medical authorities in Jerusalem, had no hospital of any kind nearer than Nazareth, so it was agreed that all *grands blessés* whether French, British or Indian should be sent to us. Fruchaud joined us fortunately at the end of four days. We needed him.

It was very exciting to see the unit gather itself together, come to life and rise in a body to meet the urgent occasion. Nancy Wright had turned the outhouse into an operating room in a couple of hours. It became a dynamo whose wheels never stopped turning. Fruchaud was a tiger, he could and did work at lightning speed for twenty-four hours on end. With Avery to help her, and Rosie and Cynthia to clean instruments and wash rubber gloves, Nancy kept pace with him, while T. W., Barbara and I turned to in reception with Thérèse and Giselle.

The hospital throbbed. Night and day the fight went on, our special fight to save men's lives. Everyone was engaged in battle, most of all perhaps the sisters in the small hot crowded wards. With caps awry and stained aprons limp and the sweat streaming down their faces, they fought for their patients tirelessly, quietly; quick and vigilant they were and faultlessly efficient; and the men in their steaming beds knew, and complete understanding existed between them and their nurses. And all the while the ambulances kept rolling in at the gate and the tempo of the battle increased, until there came a day when we were bombed and the patients we were to send down to Nazareth by train were killed in the railway station and the ammunition dump near the church went up and the church bell began to ring its alarm.

If I had had any doubts left of my staff they were put to rest once and for all on that exciting day. We had been machine-gunned each morning at about six o'clock. A single Vichy plane had made it a habit to fly over our camp before breakfast and let go with its mitrailleuse, but our own tents were widely dispersed and no one had been hurt, so we paid little attention. My tent was just outside the convent courtyard between the back door of the operating room and the morgue. If the pop-pop sounded very near, I would unashamedly get out of bed and lie under it until the noise stopped—then I would go back to bed again and wait for Wright to come and dress my shoulder.

I had chosen to place my hut near the hospital buildings, partly in order to be on call immediately, partly out of laziness. For the camp was enormous. With a hundred yards between each tent it was bound to be.

The mess tent was in the center of the great field, the nurses' tents were to the far side, the trucks were parked beyond in pairs, also with the regulation hundred yards' distance between each pair. The M.T.C. girls had moved to an abandoned house out of sight at the back of the nuns' compound, and on the brink of the wadi with the Arab town opposite. All these distances had irritated me. To walk miles across a blazing field to lunch every day, with an inflamed shoulder, other miles to find Nick Alderson in his faraway truck, to trek down in the heat to see Barbara, was really, I grumbled, too much of a good thing. I revised my opinion the day we were bombed.

We had finished lunch, the nurses had scattered for a half hour's rest and I was lying down in my very hot little tent when the first bomb fell. I think it hit the railway station and the Red Cross train. I don't know how many bombs there were all told. I know the ammunition dump went up across the street a minute later just as I reached the reception shed. But what I recall most vividly is the sight of the nurses legging it across the field from their tents. Edith Irving was in the lead. How that girl can run. After her came the rest, hair flying; they hadn't waited to put on caps and aprons. Three minutes after the first bomb they were in their wards, and I knew what I knew—that never, whatever happened, would any one of them let the unit down. I noticed the nurses especially. I remember with pleasure the sight of them in their bright blue overalls flying toward me across the wide yellow field, but no one was found wanting that day. None lost their heads. It was only when the church bell began to toll the alarm that the nuns were frightened. They had been warned that the bells would only ring out at a time of great danger, so they came running to find me all of a twitter like a flock of scared birds to ask what it meant and what they should do.

"I don't know," I said, "but I will go and find out."

Fruchaud stopped me as I reached the gate. He came hurrying out of the operating room. "You are going, madame, to see Colonel Wright."

"Yes, to ask his advice for the nuns."

"Then let me advise you for yourself. If you will take *toutes ces dames* (he meant all the girls) and go down to Nazareth I will stay here with our patients."

"But colonel, I couldn't do that."

"I assure you—it would be best."

"But no—oh no—it wouldn't be best at all. How can you believe—"

He bowed. "It shall be as you wish." And he went back to his work.

He had meant what he said, but I think he was pleased that I wouldn't accept such an arrangement.

I walked out of the gate and down the street to Colonel Wright's head-

quarters. The bells were tolling and the munitions dump was exploding and the troops as I went were taking up their battle stations and Major Hackett of the Trans-Jordan Frontier Force was talking on the telephone about tanks as I walked into the office of the area commander. They appeared to be Vichy tanks. But when he asked how many and how far away they were, I didn't hear the answer.

Then Colonel Wright came in and I told him the nuns were frightened by the church bells and would he tell me what they should do. And he said, "Tell them to stay where they are. Nothing more. But if fighting begins in the street get them together in the courtyard and keep them there—the same applies to your girls."

"Very well."

"I would advise your taking your staff away; would send you down to Jerusalem if I could; but I can't. The road is cut. We're surrounded by Vichy tanks."

"We wouldn't have gone," I said. "You know that. We've a hospital full of wounded."

I turned to go. He stopped me. There was a gleam of pleasure in his eye. "If there is a battle," he said, "there is a danger that the Arabs across the wadi may rise against us."

"In that case," I answered, "you'd better send someone with me to inspect our camp. Barbara and the girls are living in a house on the edge of the wadi."

So he sent a young officer back with me and we walked round the camp and found an unexploded bomb embedded in the field halfway between the two pairs of trucks, and decided to leave Barbara and the girls where they were, but to place a guard on the house. And the guard came at nightfall and camped on Barbara's veranda with their rifles and a machine gun. But the Vichy tanks, none of us know why, didn't attack Deraa; Colonel Wright didn't have his battle after all—and the little nuns slept in peace.

## CHAPTER XVI

### I

WE FOLLOWED hot on the heels of the French brigade into Damascus. No argument this time as to whether or not we should be allowed to move up with the troops. The hospital had earned the admiration and respect of the British medical authorities. Our patients had arrived at their base hospitals in excellent shape and Nazareth and Jerusalem both sent messages of congratulation on the work we had done. Never again would the efficiency of the unit be called in question by the British command.

It had become not only an accepted, integral part of the French brigade; it had come to life, had a vitality and a character now of its own that depended on no one person or group of persons. There had been a moment at Deraa when its character and perhaps even its existence had been threatened. Commandant Durbach had seized on the opportunity to show his authority, during Fruchaud's absence, by ordering the American Field Service to hand over a certain number of trucks to the A.C.L. at Kenetra. He had been reported to me as saying, "Now we are on French soil, I propose to run this hospital myself and shall allow no woman to interfere."

The woman referred to was feeling pretty wretched that day. My shoulder had become inflamed, I could keep nothing down, not even the lime juice and was being violently sick in my suffocating tent when Nick Alderson came to tell me that the trucks were being dispersed under Durbach's orders. I said, "Just a minute, Nick," finished being sick for the time being and went in search of Durbach. I pointed out to him that the vehicles were not his to dispose of. They had been given by an American committee to my unit and could not be replaced if we lost them. I would gladly lend two water buggies if the A.C.L. needed them at Kenetra, but if we started giving our trucks away we would no longer be a mobile unit and would lose a great part of our value.

The trucks did not go and Durbach did. He was transferred to Kenetra on Fruchaud's return, and took over that light field ambulance from Vernier, who had broken down suddenly in the middle of the battle. But the episode had involved a principle that had to be settled and B. had had to come with

Colonel Brosset to Deraa to settle it. A miserable affair but finished. Colonel Fruchaud had stood by me, Brosset, representing the French H.Q., had upheld my authority and all was well.

The American Field Service broke away at this time. They had never liked being attached to a hospital. Some went back to the States, some stayed on with the French as ambulance drivers, one—we called him “Smithy”—had fallen in love with Nancy Wright (they were married not long after in Beirut). The Friends’ Ambulance Unit undertook to fill the vacancies from Cairo, and so we folded our tents and loaded our trucks and took the road.

But before we move on to Damascus I must mention Basil Russell, Squadron Leader R.A.F. and air liaison officer of the Spears Mission with the Free French. For he came to see me in Deraa and found me vomiting wildly in my tent and sent an S.O.S. to Jerusalem to B. Such a kind creature he was and so unlucky. He got himself taken prisoner a week later on Mezzé airdrome near Damascus, and later when he had come back to his liaison job he quarreled with the Free French and was transferred to India and later again he disappeared into Burma, never to return.

Poor Basil. His wife had written asking me if I would take her into the unit, I had agreed, and she was already straining to get out from England when we were in Deraa, badgering Dorea every other day in London, laying sprightly but determined siege to the passport office; and she did get to us in time to see him. They met in Cairo, he came I think twice to Tobruk. They had I suppose a fortnight together in all, before he was posted to India, not much out of five years’ separation but more than was granted to many young wives. Poor Jocelyn, she called Basil her “camel” and always carried a stuffed camel with her as a sort of mascot. He did look rather like one. But their story is only one of many linked with the life of the unit. If I were to tell you of all the love affairs, of the engagements made and broken, the wild trips across deserts to find husbands or brothers or sweethearts, they would fill a book and you would get a picture all out of focus. For the work of the unit was the thing that mattered, and the life of the unit in the midst of war; our little personal lives had to go on as best they could, inside and alongside the exciting, grueling task given us to do.

I went on ahead to Damascus at Fruchaud’s suggestion, to see Koenig and find new quarters for our hospital. The brigade had moved up to Nebek in the north and Deraa was already too far behind the battle, in his opinion, to be of use. It was and has remained one of the fixed principles of this distinguished surgeon that in war all big surgical operations should be per-



formed as near the lines as possible. Comfort, quiet, even the safety of the patients were to him secondary considerations. To receive the wounded quickly and operate thoroughly, as soon as possible after the man had been wounded, was the one thing that mattered. He has dealt with the subject extensively in his book *La Chirurgie de Guerre*, and argued his case repeatedly with the British Medical Service during the year and a half that he remained *médecin chef* of our unit; with us he had no need to argue; we were as keen as he to be near the fighting.

Cynthia drove me that day. Damascus had been a lodestar for both of us and her round young face was alight with anticipation as we bounced over the shell holes of the damaged road through the dazzling heat. But Damascus does not reveal itself to a stranger who arrives by car in the glare of a June noon. We drew up before a large modern hotel and saw through our dark spectacles a long white wide street with tramlines and shops that seemed to run into the side of a mountain.

The Orient Palace Hotel appeared to be deserted. We bought a French paper from an Arab newsboy and read that General Catroux had taken over the city the day before as *Délégué Général et Commandant en Chef des Armées du Levant*. A long-legged cadaverous British officer with a mournful face and humorous eyes unfolded out of a chair in the hotel and introduced himself. He was Major Roselli, he said, public relations, arrived from Cairo and did we know an old friend of his who was somewhere in these parts, called Barbara Graham—and would we have a drink? We were joined in the deserted bar by a colonel who presented himself as Colonel Gardner, British consul in Damascus, exiled to Jerusalem during the Vichy regime, come back now to take over the consulate again. Colonel Gardner had a soothing bedside manner, but seemed depressed. Yes, he said, the city was quiet. The fighting had been on the outskirts. Collet had marched in from Kenetra without opposition but the Indians and Australians had had an unpleasant time at Mezzé airdrome. No, the road to Beirut was decidedly not open. No roads were open save the one we had come by—and he seemed to disapprove in a paternal fashion of our having come, but was anxious to be of assistance.

We asked him the way to Koenig's headquarters and followed the tramlines toward the pale-brown mountain. Koenig was in possession of what had been the offices of the Vichy staff. He laughed sardonically when he saw us.

"Colonel Fruchaud suggested—"

"I know. I know. Your Fruchaud is a madman. He wants to operate under the mouths of the guns. Sapristi and he does too. I saw him at it in Eritrea.

Well—I have your place for you. You are to take over the Italian hospital as soon as you like—the sooner the better. The war isn't over with the fall of Damascus. You'll have plenty of work to do."

Motoring back to Deraa that afternoon we saw General Wavell in the distance. His car was parked with two others in the road and he was walking away from us across a field toward a tumble-down house with General Catroux and a couple of staff officers. He and Catroux were talking as they walked, and General Wavell was scratching mildly the seat of his pants. There was something infinitely comforting about the sturdy unassuming back and that homely gesture of the commander in chief in the Middle East.

We took over the Italian hospital as I remember two or three days later, and were getting it ready when B. turned up to go off again immediately with General le Gentilhomme to see how the fighting was going. He came several times during the next fortnight. He had been asked to make a report on the Syrian situation for the war cabinet and brought a secretary with him from Cairo, I think on his second visit. But whether it was then or later that he had interviews with the Arab leaders, I don't remember. General Catroux had proclaimed the independence of the Levant States at the beginning of the campaign and the British government had added its guarantee to the French proclamation, but it must have been evident even then that the Arabs were not too certain of the bona fide attitude of the Free French in this matter, for B. I know was at pains to emphasize, when he arrived, the fundamental unity of the Free French and the British, and to explain that the former had the full support of the British in promising the Levant States their freedom.

The girls and I in the meantime had discovered Damascus. To walk in the streets in July in the heat of the day was to walk through a fiery furnace, the floor red-hot under your feet, the sky a white-hot metal lid covering the world, but the air was dry, the evenings were cool and the minarets of the mosques were frail silver at night under the stars. Barbara and I would go nearly every afternoon with Cynthia or Rosie or some of the others into the *suhks* and walk through the clamoring jostling, colorful throng. Or we would take a car and go up along the river bank to a crazy café that hung high above the road at the top of a steep and uncertain wooden stair. Three rivers ran along the mountainside, one above the other, and the café was astride the middle stream. It flowed behind the stone tables where parties of Damascans sat drinking coffee, it fountained from the centers of the tables themselves, and there was a waterfall from the river above, that worked by a string. You pulled the string and it tumbled and rushed past under your feet and went cascading away—to the delight of the gentle

little women, so mysteriously hooded in black, who would come in rattling fiacres with their children to spend the afternoon by the rollicking water.

I had taken the ground floor of a small house near the hospital, had furnished it with our camp furniture and some gay-colored bits of stuff from the bazaar and was living with Barbara and T. W. and Rosie and Cynthia. There was a terrace where Barbara kept a pair of tame pigeons, and a small garden with a stream running through it, and every morning very early a fine-looking Arab horseman would turn up leading a horse for T. W. Where she had picked him up I don't know to this day but he was eminently respectable, a rather grand person I believe. It was impossible for T. W. to remain anywhere for a week without finding a horse to ride.

She moved out of the flat to make room for B. on one of his visits and he stayed with us for a week. I didn't see much of him as my days were spent in the hospital, his with Catroux or Le Gentilhomme; but we would meet sometimes at the French Officers' Club for lunch or dinner. Koenig would join us, or Brosset or Valin of the French Air Force, and there would be talk naturally of the war, of the air raids in England, the battle of Crete, the German advance into Russia and the campaign in the Western Desert—but the immediate question that preoccupied them all, B. no less than the others, was the bitter question of the forces of General Dentz.

I had had personally a shocking proof of their attitude toward the Free French a few days after we had opened our hospital. Madame Catroux had been to inspect the big French military hospital and had come to us with a dreadful story. The hospital was a huge affair, with a permanent staff of French military doctors and nurses. They had stayed on naturally as the place was full of wounded and Madame Catroux had sent them a considerable quantity of medical and surgical supplies from her Red Cross stores as well as four hundred sheets. She had followed up her gift two days later by a visit and had found thirty Free French wounded dying from neglect and maltreatment in a distant wing of the great building. They had been wounded early in the battle for Damascus and taken prisoner by the Vichy forces. Most of them had been there for two or three weeks, they were lying on filthy mattresses without sheets, there were no nurses to look after them and the doctors they said hadn't been near them for days.

Madame Catroux cried with rage as she described the scene. "They are skeletons," she said, "they are burning with fever—and the smell—when I went into the rooms. One man was calling for a drink. He was the only French soldier in the room with five Arabs and the Arabs were sitting on their beds staring at him. 'A boire,' he was calling. 'Pour l'amour de Dieu donnez-moi à boire.' But the Arabs only stared."

Madame Catroux had summoned the head French nurse and asked her what she meant by leaving this man to die of thirst and the nurse had shrugged her shoulders and said, "Let his companions see to it. I've no time." And the wretched sick man had called out, "I don't want to die here with those men staring at me. Take me away. I won't die with those eyes staring at me."

"It is because they are Free French," Madame Catroux told us. "I sent four hundred sheets myself to that hospital two days ago—and all their own men are in clean beds, but our men are dying on dirty mattresses. You can see by their charts why they are dying. Will you take ten, today, into your hospital if my husband gives orders to have them moved? Twenty can go to the sisters at St. Joseph."

We said yes and she hurried away. That afternoon we received an order signed by Catroux, so Fruchaud and I went to the military hospital and we found it was as she had said and we had the ten wounded men brought to us that evening and all our building with its big airy wards that had been sweet and clean was filled with the smell of their gangrenous wounds immediately they were carried in. And Fruchaud had to open up their terrible wounds and operate anew on each man and I watched the operations and I remember them all, particularly I remember one man who had had a bullet through his arm, and had a dressing on it, but the Vichy surgeon hadn't noticed that the bullet had gone through the top of his arm into his shoulder though all his shoulder was black, and Fruchaud had to cut most of it away. The shoulder blade was shattered into a hundred fragments. I remember that the smell in the operating room when the black wreckage was laid open made even the doctors want to vomit. This man recovered, all recovered slowly thanks to Fruchaud's magnificent work, except the man who was dying of thirst. He was too far gone when he came. Fruchaud could do nothing. He died in the night and though we gave him cool water and orange juice as much as he could drink and never left him alone, his thirst wasn't quenched.

## II

B. must have left us about the end of the first week in July; this time I believed our good-by was final. He must get back he said to London. The Spears Mission had by now spread to West Africa and Egypt. There was a mission at Brazzaville with branches at Donala and Fort-Lamy, there was a large mission in Cairo. Wherever French resistance was active B. had organized a mission or a branch of his mission to assist them. There must be

a mission in Syria as soon as the fighting was over, but the central organization was still in London, and he was anxious to get back.

The battle for Beirut had been dragging on. We knew little about it in Damascus. The Australians, we were told, had been having a tough time. If Pétain's troops had fought against the Germans in France, people said, with the ardor they displayed in the Levant, the war might have taken a very different course. At last we heard that the armistice had been signed at Acre on the fourteenth of July, that the Vichy troops had withdrawn to Tripoli and that the road to Beirut was open. I was privately informed at the same time that General Spears had flown up to Beirut from Cairo and was staying at the Hotel St. Georges.

The temptation was too great to resist. I was off within an hour, Rosie at the wheel, speeding along one of the most beautiful roads in the world. I have traveled it so many times since that I cannot remember the special thrill of that first view of the Bekaa Valley or that first winding climb over the mountains. The road has become a living thing to me; the long smooth sweep of the Bekaa between the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon opens out before my eyes as I remember—and the mountains rise above the snug village of Chtaura where Masabki waits in his hostelry to put succulent dishes before us—and I hear the tinkle of the camels' bells as we round the last high bend on the top of the pass; and as I look back and down, down, I see the shadows of soft clouds moving over the wide fields and Mount Hermon white as crystal in the far distance; and I long to be back again in body as I am in spirit, in that land where the Bedouin tents are black velvet on the pale smooth flanks of the mountains and the sheep and the goats follow the ready pipe of the shepherd and know his voice and the prophet Elijah lies buried they tell you not very far from the valley where Adonis died in the arms of Venus, for Syria and the Lebanon are dear to me, the people have become my friends and there is more beauty in their country than in any other that I have found in the world.

Rosie and I had chosen, unknown to ourselves, a day of ceremony for our trip to Beirut and we came on a great crowd in the Place des Canons with troops drawn up in the square. General Wilson and General Catroux were making a state entry into the city and we watched it from under the arch of the *Petit Sérail*, the seat as I learned later of the Lebanese government. But when we reached the Hotel St. Georges we found B. had been and gone. He had come flying back they told us at the St. Georges and had been with General Catroux to see General Wilson at Aley in the hills. There was a story going round the town that General Wilson's first action on arriving in Beirut had been to call on the Vichy French admiral and that General

Catroux had been very put out by this gesture of friendly courtesy to an enemy who had been sinking British ships in Beirut Harbor only a few days before. We heard it on the terrace of the hotel. We didn't know whether to believe it or not, but I began to understand very soon that something had gone wrong with the armistice terms and was not astonished to hear from B. that the situation in Syria was going to be very difficult, so difficult in fact that Oliver Lyttelton, Minister of State in the Middle East, had raised the question of his staying on for three months to head the branch of the Spears Mission in Beirut.

I needed no telling to grasp what was happening. That the Armistice Commission was behaving as if not the Free French but the Vichy French were our friends was a fact that affected every French member of our hospital staff as well as every patient. There was not an officer in the unit, nor a patient, who hadn't a friend or relative on the other side. Immediately the armistice was signed, their one idea was to get in touch. They couldn't believe, our people, that their old comrades wouldn't respond. They still were confident that they could explain away the nightmare of misunderstanding. They didn't know, how could they? that Dentz had sold out to Germany, was in constant touch with Berlin, and even while the negotiations for an armistice were going on at Acre was laying the basis of an organization to disrupt the country and supply the Axis with information. Immediately the fighting was over they tried to get in touch with their friends on the Vichy side, and found it impossible.

The terms of the armistice laid it down that the Free French were allowed to do no propaganda among the Vichy forces. That they should be denied all access to the Vichy troops was perhaps not intended but that was the interpretation given by the British. Again and again men I know set out in quest of their old comrades and came back frustrated, ashamed, infuriated, doors slammed in their faces, entrance to the Vichy cantonments forbidden, the road to conciliation barred, by the British.

The hospital was in a furor in a fortnight. Our doctors turned sullen, Fruchaud's face was black as he did the dressings of the men who had been rescued from the Vichy surgeons. He seethed now with rage, stormed in and out of the wards, burst out one day in a fury. "Now I know," he shouted, "how we are going to be treated when France is liberated. We the Free French will be *les derniers des bandits*."

Out of bounds, beyond the pale, confined to makeshift barracks and improvised camps, were the Free French. But the enemy or what we had thought was the enemy since he had fought us and filled our hospitals with wounded and taken our men prisoner and delivered them over to the

Germans, the enemy was at large all over the country. His citadel was Tripoli on the coast north of Beirut. He had withdrawn there officially and no British or Free French were allowed to approach him in that fastness, but he was rushing up and down the land as he chose, you met him everywhere in Damascus, in the hotels, in the hairdressers', in the *suhks*, in the French Officers' Club. It had been his club before, hadn't it? Why should he be debarred from using it now? A battle? What of that? He had taken sides against us in this war. What matter? He was out of it now, he was going home, that was why he and his plump wife were so busy in the bazaars. We were sending him home and we were allowing him to take five hundred kilos of luggage with him and he and his wife were buying up everything they could lay hands on. Buttons by the kilo, hooks and eyes and pins by the gross, shoes certainly, but leather soles for shoes as well by the hundred and bales of woolen cloth and silks and needles and thread and brushes and combs and soap, much soap, and food, rice and olive oil, sugar and coffee and flour—and last but not least silver and gold. Oh yes, much silver and gold found its way to France in the hold of the "Providence."

It was the same in Beirut. The Vichy wives who were going home descended on the shops of Beirut like a flock of locusts, and where they had passed, the shops were bare; and if you motored from Damascus to Beirut or Baalbek, you found that all over the country the enemy was still comfortably installed in his handsome barracks while our troops, Free French or British or Indian, camped out on bare blazing hillsides or in mosquito-infested groves. The Black Watch for instance.

I took a car one day and went with three of the girls to Baalbek. We had rations with us but we stopped at the Hotel Palmyre in the afternoon and asked for tea. The manager said he was sorry, the hotel was requisitioned for French officers and I answered, "Then it is quite right to serve us. We rank as officers. I am La Générale Spears, *directrice* of a hospital in the Free French forces." But again the manager said he was sorry. The hotel was requisitioned for the other French—not the Free French—all he could do was allow us to drink a glass of citronade outside on the veranda. So we went away and pushing on past Rayak we saw a fine *caserne* on our right and a British red cap in the road by the gate to it so we stopped and asked him if there was a British unit anywhere near and he said yes; we'd find the Black Watch camped just over there in those trees. He pointed behind us to a grove of poplars about two hundred yards away, so we turned and found Colonel Picthorne sitting on a camp stool in a suffocating thicket fighting mosquitoes and drinking tea with Captain Wilding and two or three of his staff. They were delighted to see the girls and gave us tea in tin mugs and

army biscuits to eat, and told us that they were not allowed to go near the caserne and the colonel said it was a pity that the Vichy officers had confined their troops to barracks as many of them he believed wanted to join us—but only half a dozen or so managed to escape each night and get into our lines. This battalion of the Black Watch was decimated, as some who read this may know, in the Western Desert and many of its officers are buried in the cemetery outside Tobruk. When I visited their graves a year later I thought of that horrid, hot little camp and of the French officers next door to it who had issued from their fine barracks to sail away to France, and it didn't seem quite fair.

## III

Madame Catroux rang me up one day toward the end of July in Damascus and asked me to dine "*en petit comité*." There would be no one but ourselves and I must be indulgent if the food was uneatable. She had been in Beirut assessing the damage to the *Résidence des Pins* by the R.A.F. "Two bombs, *ma chère*, right through the middle of it. We won't be able to live in it for a year. It is going to cost millions. We've had to take over Weygand's old house for the winter. In the meantime I'm at Aley."

"You are speaking from Aley?"

"No, from Damascus. I've just come over from Aley for the night. I've been counting the knives and forks left behind by Madame Dentz and going over the linen. What a woman. If you could see the state the linen is in. What with the R.A.F. bombing *les Pins* and Madame Dentz leaving everything in confusion. But there, Georges says I'm not to talk about the R.A.F. and he wants to see you, he has news for you."

So T. W. drove me to the French Residency in Damascus and General Catroux's A.D.C. came down through the fresh shadowy garden where a fountain was sending frail crystal plumes into the soft scented night and led me up the outside stair into the charming French drawing room with its Louis XV *bergères* and its shaded lamps. Coming into it for the first time straight from Deraa, with the glare and the dust and the flies of the desert clinging to me, this civilized bit of authentic France had seemed like a miracle. And now again as Madame Catroux drew me down on to a settee beside her, I asked myself if the charming interior that reminded me so vividly of my own house in the Rue Monsieur in Paris were not in fact a dream.

We were sitting in the loggia after dinner outside the candlelit dining room. Two Annamite boys in spotless white, come all the way from Indo-China with Madame Catroux's Siamese cats, were serving coffee, when the



general told me that B. was not going back to England with General de Gaulle but was remaining in the Levant and would be arriving quite soon.

How wonderful!

General Catroux smiled. His mournful gaze was kind. Madame Catroux, touched perhaps by my joy at the news, began to tell me of how she and Georges had first met in Syria many years before. Her voice was a caress, the light of romance softened her face. How pleasant it was, I thought, to find friends in this strange Eastern land, people of taste, of culture and sensibility, and a welcome in this house that was like an enchanted memory out of the past. B. would be happy here working with Catroux. I walked on air as I said good night. Madame Catroux followed me to the top of the garden staircase.

"You will want a house," she said. "I'll give you mine in Aley if Georges will let me take another that I like better—" She put her arm lightly round my shoulder. "Georges likes your general so much," she murmured.

The house in Aley wasn't precisely her own. It had been General Dentz's official hot-weather residence but General Catroux had the disposal of it apparently, together with all the other official French residences in the country, and because he almost always did what his wife asked, he agreed to her moving across the valley to a bigger house and passed this one on to us. It was a twenty-minute drive down the mountain to Beirut, and as the hospital was ordered to Beirut when B. arrived at the beginning of August, it all worked out very well. I could live with B. and look after the unit at the same time. It is a charming little house, perched above a deep valley, and from the terrace you can see down the valley to the distant harbor of Beirut and watch the ships come in or sail out over the still, pale water. We always lunched and dined on the terrace and I used to watch the mountains change from pale opalescent shades to crimson at sunset and so it was that I saw the French Army of Syria sail for France. More than thirty-five thousand officers and men went home during that summer and autumn of '41 to France. Under three thousand rallied to General de Gaulle, and of those, many remained not to take part in the war but because they had business interests in Syria and the Lebanon. If the Armistice Commission had cherished the hope that by treating the Vichy French with great consideration they would be won over to our side, its hopes were disappointed, and if dear naïve Brigadier Crystol still hoped when those loaded ships sailed away that the men who sailed in them would give a good account of the kind British to their friends at home, that hope too seemed vain. For more than one of the officers as he went on board declared that he would meet and fight us again in North Africa and I know that they kept their word.

If Brigadier Crystol should happen on these pages, it will hurt I fear his tender heart that I should say such hard things about his friends. He wasn't responsible for the terms of the armistice, those had been laid down by General Wilson, but as head of the Armistice Commission he carried them out and I remember the day when he called on me at Aley to say good-by. The last shipload of Vichy troops had sailed that day for France, with it had gone General de Verdilliac, the Vichy French member of the commission, and Brigadier Crystol had gone down to the quay to say good-by. And he described to me how sad it was. The British military band was playing the "Marseillaise" and he told me that General de Verdilliac and he had been so moved that they could not speak—in fact they had both stood on the quay and cried.

But I had had other friends with me on my mountain terrace a few days before and I thought of them as we talked. They were three officers of the Vth Indian Brigade whom we had met in Deraa and who had been taken prisoner in the fighting near Damascus. I had come on them by chance in the Normandy Hotel. They had been shipped to France six weeks before and had just been repatriated to Beirut. They looked so thin and miserable that I said: "Come to Aley with me—it's cool. We'll sit on the terrace and have drinks." So they climbed into my car and off we went, and they began to tell me how they had been kept in the hold of a French ship for three weeks in Salonika with only an hour a day on deck in the open air, and then on the top floor of an abandoned factory in Marseilles where they had been fed like pigs out of a trough, no plates, knives or forks provided. Just then the car turned into the Place des Canons. The square was crowded with taxis and trams and vehicles of all sorts, and a number of French officers in blue and scarlet were hopping out of taxis and popping into shops and my companions said quickly, very startled: "Aren't those Vichy officers?" and I said, "Yes."

"But what are they doing? Are they allowed to go about as they like?"

"Allowed?" I echoed. "Of course they are allowed. They own this town."

I tell these things because I was asked the other day in Paris by a retired French Ambassador of distinguished record why the British Army was given the privilege of keeping order in Syria after the outbreak of violence in May, '45.

"I find it intolerable," said the Ambassador, "that the British should maintain order in our Empire. Why should there be a British Army in Syria?"

I let the word "empire" pass for the moment.

"You forget," I said, "that there was a war in the Middle East, that it was necessary to garrison the Turkish frontier."

"Nonsense, I am perfectly acquainted with the situation. We had more than adequate forces of our own to garrison Syria. We had thirty-eight thousand first-class troops."

"Don't you know what became of them, Your Excellency? All but three thousand left Syria of their own choice in '41 and came back to France. That is why there was no French Army in Syria—and why it was left to the British IXth Army to defend the Syrian frontier. Thirty-five thousand trained troops would have been a great help to us at a time when we badly needed all the help we could get. As it was, the only French troops left in Syria were the Free French Brigade and those General de Gaulle had sent to Libya to join the British VIIIth Army."

The Ambassador seemed very surprised, he seemed not to know these facts. How, after all, should he know them? He had been behind the iron curtain for four years. Unless of course he had happened to meet some of the officers who had returned from Beirut to France. I wonder what they told their friends when they got home. Even now that the curtain is lifted, there appears to be a strange reluctance to talk in official quarters of what happened in Syria in '41. A conspiracy of silence? That you may say is their own affair. But I do not see why the people of France should blame the British for the fact that the French troops under General Dentz preferred to abandon Syria rather than stay on and become involved in what the Pétain press alluded to in those days as the Anglo-German War.

#### IV

Storms of rain swept us off the hills and down the slippery hairpin bends to Beirut at the end of October. General Catroux had come forward again to help us, this time in finding a winter residence, and we moved into the Japanese consulate. It was a large house with a fine hall vaguely reminiscent of Venice like so many Levantine houses and would do we thought very well for our short stay. It was to be my home for three years but I didn't know that. We didn't expect to stay long. There was no question at the time of appointing my husband as Minister. The Foreign Office hadn't yet taken him over and put him in mufti. He was Conservative Member of Parliament for Carlisle, on active military service overseas, head of the Spears Mission in Syria and Lebanon for the moment, but the central offices of the mission were still in London. He planned to go back when his three months were up and had no intention of relinquishing his seat in the House of Commons in order to become a diplomat.

Damascus had fascinated me. A stern city, old, proud, moody and violent;

its beauty was cold, or again it was hot—the colors in the bazaars were like running flames. Beirut was soft, luscious as ripe fruit. It seemed to lack character. No elegance of the desert swept through its tortuous streets; the Arab chiefs who swaggered through the *suhks* of Damascus with flowing cloaks and clanking spurs gave place in Beirut to pale Jesuit fathers and dusky bearded bishops of the Maronite Church or the Greek Orthodox, the languid camels that wound their stilted way from the market place toward the hills seemed not to be at home.

A confused and confusing place to live in. The local aristocracy lived in an old quarter of great houses and gardens called the Quartier Sursok, with no frontage on the beautiful sea, the American University dominated the promontory at the opposite end of the town, the fine French Residency was to the south in a forest of pines next the race course and had once been a casino. We lived surrounded by schools and convents and though our house was not far above the center of the town, I was continually getting lost on my way home.

The Spears Mission was not far away. It was installed in a building that had been General Weygand's headquarters with the Hadfield-Spears Hospital next door. We had requisitioned the premises of the German hospital, the German nuns had been conducted to a refuge of their own in the hills and the *personnel féminin* of our unit lived in their house. The "Spirettes," as B. named the M.T.C. girls, parked their cars in the mission compound and became immediately a center of attraction for the British Army and Navy. Cynthia's romance that was to end two years later in marriage had already begun. Barbara had collected her old crony Swannie Roselli, Daphne was creating havoc among the officers who flocked to the bar of the Hotel St. Georges and Rosie became our A.D.C. No. 2, in conjunction with Julian Oxford, a lovable creature but the oddest A.D.C. ever known. The girls took turns as my driver. One of them would call for me each morning and take me, a five-minute run, to the hospital. It was charming. There were wide verandas from which one could look across the bay to the mountains, the wards were sunny and furnished in white. As there was no fighting in our part of the world all the nurses in turn went on leave. They too had collected many admirers and were having a very good time. It would all have been quite delightful had I not been so weak as to take on two of Madame Catroux's French nurses. That had been a mistake. They were not qualified nurses; they refused to do regular night duty, and they would go to Madame Catroux behind my back with continual complaints of the way the hospital was run. It was the British way, Colonel Fruchaud liked it, the patients were happy as kings and I had no intention whatever of changing, so I knew

that trouble was coming; but I let it ride for a time as B. was working in close and friendly co-operation with General Catroux.

We saw, B. and I, a great many people and I began gradually to sort out the different groups that made up our large heterogeneous community. There were the French to begin with. They had been given a mandate for Syria and the Lebanon by the Allies in 1921, similar to the British mandate in Palestine, and had always had a high commissioner in residence with a large civilian staff. General Catroux had now abandoned the title of high commissioner but his staff still occupied the *Grand Sérail*, and seemed to be governing the country. There was a President of the Lebanese Republic, Monsieur Naccache, who had been appointed by General Dentz, and General Catroux had confirmed his appointment, but that didn't seem to mean very much, as the constitution had been abrogated by the French at the beginning of the war and the Chamber of Deputies dismissed. The President had a wife, but apparently she didn't count. She was a mild little creature and no match for Madame Catroux. Madame Catroux was pretty rough with the Lebanese. I wondered if she would try to be rough with me. She was the first lady in Beirut; I appeared to be the second. We met constantly on Red Cross committees, and at official dinners and public receptions. Her manner was effusive but there was a dangerous gleam in her eye. She was up to something, I knew; I awaited it, whatever it was, without undue apprehension.

General Catroux held the fine title of *Commandant en Chef des Armées du Levant*, but had no army to speak of under his command. Only our brigade and the local levies, "*troupes spéciales*" they were called, who had been recruited and trained by French officers. But the British IXth Army was in occupation. General Wilson had moved his headquarters up from Jerusalem to Brumana in the hills. There were a great many British officers in Beirut, there was the Spears Mission, the Security Mission, there were the supply and medical services, there was a naval mission under Captain Morse.

Morse had breezed into my life on the telephone before I left Damascus. I didn't know him from Adam when he rang up, a moment later he was a friend. Two minutes was all it ever took Anthony Morse, now, as I write, rear admiral in command at Singapore, to make a friend for life.

"Hello. Is that Mrs. Spears? I'm Morse. Senior naval officer in Beirut, just arrived. I'm Barbara's cousin. Got that? Barbara Graham's. Well then. Let's get together." And we did.

The American community was twofold. There was the American University with its beautiful hospital and the American consulate. Of the two the university was the more important. George Wadsworth, who was the

first American Minister to be accredited to the Levant States, would I believe agree with me. For the university held aloof from politics, its staff was comparatively permanent and its influence in the country widespread and profound.

I first came to know the president, Bayard Dodge, through Nick Alderson and our F.A.U. boys. They had come to me one day in Damascus to ask if they might do some medical relief work in the villages. They had the time, they explained, and they were in touch with some of the local Syrian doctors who were eager to help their own people but had no means of reaching them. Our trucks were not in use. If they might take a truck out two or three times a week to some of the outlying villages they could organize a mobile clinic.

I had thought it an excellent idea and obtained permission for the scheme from the various authorities, French and British, and they had begun in a modest way a humanitarian effort that was becoming an important factor to the British forces of occupation. The irony of it was that the boys had no desire to help the British Army. They didn't believe in it or in any army and they wanted to have as little to do with it as possible. Indeed the attraction of the work of the clinics lay largely in the fact that it removed them from a military hospital and the necessity to nurse men who had been wounded in battle.

They would go out each day from Damascus to one of a series of distant villages, taking a local doctor and medical supplies. They would ask the chief man of the village to lend them a room and the villagers would flock to the house, for the medical services in the country, never adequate, had broken down completely during the war through lack of transport. Encouraged by this response the boys had then approached President Dodge, whose sympathy with all humanitarian work was well known, had asked his advice and had then come back to me with a plan for setting up a number of permanent medical clinics in outlying parts of the country.

"It is our kind of work," Nick Alderson said to me, "real Quaker work. We would much rather do relief in the villages among the poor than nurse the troops."

I looked into his charming eyes and was baffled. I would never understand the conscientious objector. The willingness of these boys to spend their lives tending skeleton babies dying of dysentery, making up medicines for emaciated Bedouin women who never, poor creatures, took off their clothes, and children with hideous sores was admirable but their attitude to the troops exasperated me.

"Don't forget, Nick, that if it weren't for the young men of your age who

are holding the Syrian frontier you would have no chance to do the village work."

He didn't change color. "I don't mind being killed," he said quietly, "but I will not fight."

"Anyone can say that, Nick." I was put out. I remembered it six months later when the bomb hit him.

I went to B. with their project. The boys, I pointed out, had become in spite of themselves excellent channels of friendly communication, they were doing more than anyone else to gain the friendship and confidence of the people. If it was important to us to gain the sympathy of the Arabs in our war effort it was worth while surely to encourage these clinics. B. saw the point at once, so did General Wilson. So did Swannie Roselli, in charge of public relations, so did Bayard Dodge.

There had been four outstanding Americans in Beirut during the Vichy period and all four had kept the British flag flying as if it were their own. The four were the American consul general, Mr. Engert, and his wife, and Bayard and Mary Dodge. Mr. Engert had always loved England; as for Sarah, his wife, he told me that when he proposed marriage she had said she couldn't have accepted him if he hadn't felt as she did about the British. They gave proof of the genuineness of this feeling before and after we came. The British wounded whom I found in the French military hospital in Beirut spoke of Mrs. Engert's kindness with deep emotion.

America had not yet come into the war. I am speaking of November, '41; Pearl Harbor still lay ahead. But that didn't deter the Engerts nor Bayard and Mary Dodge from showing General Dentz where their sympathies lay. Mr. Engert became one of B.'s intimate colleagues and remained so during all the months that we were in the Levant together, and Bayard didn't hesitate when I asked his help with the clinics. Being a saint didn't prevent him from taking an interest in the affairs of the world and the outcome of the war.

A remarkable couple, Bayard and Mary Dodge. They are among the very few completely unselfish people I have ever known. I could not have done half what I did without them. When I took on the presidency of the British Red Cross in Syria and the Lebanon Mary became my vice president. When I started the holiday clubs for service women Mary was there to help me carry them through. In a thousand ways she helped me—spending herself day in and day out for the British troops, visiting them in hospital, organizing concerts and working parties, throwing open her house to them on Sunday afternoons. And the clinics could not have been a success without Bayard

for he knew the country and the people, he could find us the doctors we needed and his name stood high as far as the Turkish frontier and beyond.

I was frank with him. "I am interested in these clinics," I said, "primarily because they help us, indirectly, in the war. In peacetime, it would be different, the humanitarian side would be paramount; for as long as the war lasts, nothing else matters."

We formed a committee under the aegis of the Spears Mission to run them. Bayard Dodge became chairman, the head of the Economic Section of the mission, treasurer, Swannie Roselli our liaison with Cario, and five centers were established in outlying parts of the country. But I found that the French had little sympathy with the effort. It was the old story of resentment and a new story beginning, a story of suspicion. What were we up to? What lay behind this? Who were these British conscientious objectors? It was impossible to explain them to Madame Catroux. How could I make her understand these boys when I couldn't understand them myself?

Bayard laughed when I told him how she had cross-questioned me about the clinics.

"Wait and see," he said. "You will find her starting clinics of her own before long."

"All the better, there is room enough, God knows."

"Exactly."

But Madame Catroux was impatient. To organize a rival service of clinics would take months and in the meantime there was the Hadfield-Spears Hospital just down the road. It made her nervous. She didn't feel at liberty to inspect, make suggestions as to how it should be run, yet she knew she could run it better than I, and that she should be the head of it. It ought to come under her. She was the head of the French Red Cross. She must bring it into her orbit. But how should she set about it?

Then she thought of something and the something reached me in the form of a *note de service* over General Catroux's signature and it laid down certain rules that were to be followed in my hospital, particularly rules regarding the nursing of the patients and most particularly in regard to night duty.

When I received these orders I sent General Catroux copies of my contract and correspondence with General de Gaulle, and General Catroux when he had read them was obliged to recognize my authority over my nursing staff to be absolute. Madame Catroux had made her attempt to get control of my unit and had failed. She never returned to the attack, but turned her energies into organizing a very excellent field ambulance of her own. We were to meet in the Delta, in Tunisia, Algiers, Italy, and at last in France, each



with our unit. If we were rivals it was a friendly rivalry; if she outran me in the rapidity with which she moved across continents, we far outdistanced her in the number of men we looked after. I think we were better friends after the Beirut incident than before.

But I had had enough of French nurses who refused to accept our British ways and my far from rigorous discipline. Thérèse and Giselle had said bluntly in Damascus that they would not do so and had gone to the A.C.L. Madame Catroux's two Red Cross ladies now returned to her fold. There remained Madame Butherne.

I don't remember just when she joined us, but I think it must have been when we arrived in Beirut. She had gone out with Colonel Fruchaud's original party to Dakar, had worked with him during the Eritrean campaign and had stayed on with the A.C.L. during the fighting for Damascus. She was a big strong fine-looking woman with no nonsense about her. I had put her in reception and she had done very well. She wanted to stay with us. I was determined not to give way on the question of night duty, but in reception the problem didn't arise. In that service the nurse had to be ready to go on duty at any hour of the day or night. I decided to keep her. I never regretted it. She was loyal and hard-working and made many friends in the unit. I became very fond of her.

It had been on the whole a pleasant autumn. We had made new friends and had begun to know and like the people of the country. B. had had too much to do and became wretchedly ill with bronchitis and threatened pneumonia when the cold weather set in. But aside from this anxiety my life had been very agreeable. I think of it now as a hiatus between two periods of strenuous endeavor. It came to an end suddenly in December. B. was called to London for consultation and I received orders to pack up the hospital and move with the Free French Brigade to the Western Desert.

## CHAPTER XVII

### I

T W.'s khaki shoulders are solid against the glare of the Sinai desert, her hands are steady on the wheel as the Ford V-8 plunges and sways. A stolid British girl, one of the best girl jockeys in England, she has entered for the war in the Middle East stakes as she used to enter for a point to point. And she moves off into the desert as if she were moving up to the starting line. There is the same slight compression of the lips and the same purpose behind her calm mask of indifference; she means to prove that she is as good as a man.

The road is a switchback; the world is wide and empty and made entirely of sand and wind. Some joker has laid down this switchback across the desert and the wind is covering it under great sand-drifts. You have to charge them head on and not change gear however much you may want to, else you'll stick in the sand and if that happens you have got to get out your sand tracks and your spade and start shoveling away the desert from under the car, and you will curse softly under your breath and ask why they don't do something about the damned road. But they are doing something. Look! There, ahead of you! An Arab with a broom! He is a lone figure against the big white sky. He is sweeping the desert away. He gives a languid swish with his broom, lifts it into the air and the sand flies away on the wind.

We moved off from Beirut in convoy on New Year's Day, '42 and reached Safafi West on the twelfth. If you don't know where to look for Safafi West, no more did I. It lies to the south of Buq Buq. Coming from Cairo you make for Alexandria, turn left round some sand hummocks before you reach the city and follow the coast road through El Alamein and Dabaa and Sidi Barani until you get to Buq Buq. There is nothing at Buq Buq save a cross-roads. Down in a hollow between the main road and the sea there is a graveyard. Our tanks were caught there, bogged in the mud, but you wouldn't know that, there's nothing to show. You turn your back on it and make south at Buq Buq and find your way to Safafi along a track that might be called a road but when you get there, there is nothing, not even a crossroads, to prove to you that you have arrived.

It is a mystery to me how we got there. We had three days in Cairo while the bulk of the convoy crawled round the Delta and the girls all scattered. Barbara and Cynthia went to stay with Russell Pasha. I spent a night with the nurses at the 63rd General Hospital at Heliopolis, then moved to the Shones.' T. W. I believe went to Shepheard's where she found Jocelyn Russell waiting, Daphne to the Continental.

Jocelyn had arrived by sea-air from London a week earlier. She was to replace Virginia Clive, who was joining the W.A.A.F.'s in Jerusalem. I had been quite mistaken in thinking I could not get rid of a girl if I wanted to. It would be the easiest thing in the world to get rid of the lot. Joy Goode had already left to be married. It began to look as if Cynthia would soon follow suit. A.T.S. and W.A.A.F.'s were ready to take on any who, like Virginia, wished to leave me. No, the difficulty would be to keep them together, or get replacements. So I was glad to have Jocelyn and to find her so smart, efficient and sprightly.

She drove me round Cairo for the two delightful days that I spent in the Shones' lovely house, then I pushed on ahead with Rosie to Alex leaving Barbara to collect the others from Shepheard's and Gruppis and the Gexira Club. The rendezvous was Dabaa and they came along in great style. Rosie and I awaited them I remember in the road outside the N.A.A.F.I.

We were in camp for a week at El Dabaa and though Dabaa even in those days couldn't be called a pleasure resort, there was a town major and a superb N.A.A.F.I. called the Ark and an army bakery, and scattered all over that bit of the desert were groups of officers who popped up out of their dugouts in the sand and invited the girls to drinks and supper and sing-songs. A good deal was happening in the desert while we were at Dabaa that we didn't know about. We knew that the VIIIth Army had come into existence because we belonged to it. And we'd read in the papers in November about the new British offensive and in December we'd been told how the Australians had burst out of Tobruk and joined up with the XIII Corps. And when we reached Dabaa, we had heard tell of the tank battle of Sidi Rezek that had lasted from November 21 until December 6. But though we thought of ourselves as seasoned veterans, by the time we left Dabaa, we had no notion of what the war in the desert was like, with its vast ebb and flow, its great encircling movements, its sudden cyclonic changes of fortune. We weren't familiar with the map—took for granted since the siege of Tobruk was raised that the coast road was open, didn't know that the British had only recaptured Solum on the twelfth of January for that was the day we moved to Safafi West. It was proposed that the Foreign Legion should take Helfaya

Pass by assault from the south and we were to be there to receive the wounded. But we weren't told of this until after we got there.

Safafi West was a mark on the map some twenty kilometers southeast of Helfaya but when we got to what we thought was the spot we found ourselves on top of a rocky escarpment and there wasn't enough sand on the rock to scrape up with a spoon. There were two British trucks standing a little way off and heaps of stones scattered about and remains of Arab huts. They were in ruins but it was bitterly cold and they might perhaps provide temporary shelter—otherwise there was nothing.

Fruchaud came across to me scowling, map in hand.

"This can't be the place, Fruchaud."

"It should be. But how they expect us to put up tents?"

"I'd better ask."

I went over to the trucks and found a couple of sappers cranking up, about to move off. I asked if this was Safafi West.

"That's right, miss—and don't let your people go into those huts—they're mined. We lost two of our chaps that way this morning." He pointed behind me and turning, I saw Dr. Albert, the big fat Lebanese boy who had joined the unit in Beirut, sitting happily in the broken doorway of one of the stone huts.

"Albert," I shouted. "Come out of that hut. They are all mined." And Albert shot into the air like a balloon, and we laughed. But it wasn't exactly a jolly place. The British lorries moved off and the boys started unloading the tents. They struggled for the best part of the afternoon to put one up and we sat in the cars watching them. It was no good. Impossible to drive tent pegs into solid rock, impossible to hold the tent down. The wind tore the canvas out of their hands. And then at about four o'clock when they were ready to give it up, I saw a very queer long funnel-shaped cloud coming at us on a slant from the west and ten minutes later the lights of the world had gone out; we were groping for each other and shouting to each other through a dark that was thick and dry and icy cold—through a black wind that carried a million knives. We were in the middle, simply, of the worst sandstorm I was to encounter during our two years in the desert.

A sandstorm in hot weather is bad. A sandstorm in winter is worse. This was a sand blizzard and it had caught us on the top of an escarpment with no shelter anywhere.

We drew up our vehicles in a semicircle, nose to nose, close together like camels with their backs to the wind. Nick Alderson managed to clear a couple of trucks and put stretchers in them for the nurses. Then we all went to ground for the night. It was a long night beginning as it did at four

o'clock, but it wasn't too bad, once we climbed into the cars and shut everything. We had blankets and rugs and dry rations to last us a week, bully beef and sardines and army biscuits and cheese and water bottles filled with sweet water, and whisky and gin—and good company. What more could we want?

Rosie and I were snug in our car as a couple of Eskimos.

Barbara, next door, had produced precious tins of American beer. T. W. and her lot were busily eating on the other side of us. I could just distinguish their faces through the gritty gloom. Glum? No; on the contrary; I fear that the night was ribald, but who was there to shock? Every now and then an army truck would loom out of the dark sand fog and a voice would hail us through the wind. "I say!—Who are you? We're lost. May we spend the night in your camp?" And a man's face would peer through the car window; a face that might be a nice face if one could have seen it without its mask of sand. And I would wave a hand at the storm and shout, "Certainly; make yourself at home." And so we collected quite a number of stray vehicles round us, before we went to sleep. And when morning came and we awoke the storm was over, our guests were gone, the sun came up in a sky that was shiny as mother-of-pearl and Oscar Cashera was busy beside the rolling kitchen; so we drank boiling hot coffee and wiped the sand off our faces as best we could and moved down off the escarpment on to the plain where there was soil to hold tent pegs; and made a beautiful camp.

But the Germans surrendered Helfaya Pass before the Foreign Legion could attack, much to the Legion's disgust, and the South Africans took it over. We found them moving in when we went up to have a look at the place and they let us poke about as much as we liked. We filled the luggage rack on the roof of the car with German water containers and Barbara picked up a handsome spanner and several odd bits of iron that she fancied and Cynthia found the diary of a young German soldier who was very homesick for the fatherland and his little *Schatz Trüdchen*, but we found no silk stockings though we'd been told the cozy dugouts in the sides of the cliffs were full of them.

And the next day Commandant Savet came along with orders to take our tents down again and move on.

Commandant Savet was in charge of movements. He was a priest and an ardent Gaullist. He died fighting at Bir Hakim and is a heroic figure; but he knew nothing about moving a convoy, nor did the French convoy know how to move; and he dashed round our bit of desert collecting his scattered ambulances and signals and repair shops like a distracted hen collecting her chicks.

Our destination this time he said was Timimi sixty miles beyond Tobruk on the road to Benghazi. The French column was moving across country. We were to travel by the coast road and rejoin the brigade at El Adam.

So back we went to Buq Buq. But we had struck camp at seven in the morning and reaching Buq Buq at nine were told by an officer shivering miserably in the windy road that further movements were postponed till next day. So Fruchaud suggested that rather than sit for twenty-four hours by the roadside, I should push on with the *personnel féminin* to Tobruk, find lodgings there for the night and join him next day at El Adam.

## II

The girls were delighted at the idea. So was I. How could we know that General Rommel had started a new counteroffensive that morning and that we wouldn't be welcome in Tobruk? The very blue sea was shining through the yawning gaps in the pink and white houses as we passed through Solum. We were pleasantly excited as we climbed the escarpment to the lonely arch that was Fort Capuzzo. But the road was long. The sun was setting as we came in sight of Tobruk, swept round the terrible harbor with its eloquent burden of drowned ships and made for the heroic town. It looked a town like another in the distance. We couldn't see until we turned sharp up the hill and into what had been the main street that the houses were houses no longer.

A red cap directed us to area headquarters. I didn't understand why the officers at area were so taken aback when I climbed the stairs and walked into the half of their building that was left. I could see that they were hot and bothered. I understood, when I told them that I had sixteen women with me, that it was awkward for them. But I didn't know that we were the only women in the desert west of Merza Matruh, and it took me some time to realize that they not only didn't know what to do with us or where to put us for the night but were profoundly shocked at our being allowed in the desert at all.

Colonel Matheson, A.D.M.S., didn't pretend to be glad to see me. He stared out of his handsome eyes as if confounded.

Sleep in Tobruk? Sixteen women? Impossible. No one slept in Tobruk.

Where then should I take the girls?

There was a transit camp two miles out on the Derna road. They might take us. He got on the phone.

Someone brought me shyly a cup of tea while he telephoned. Someone was talking behind me to someone else about dumps. Rommel it appeared

had captured them. They were our dumps and he had swept forward and gobbled up the lot.

The transit camp evidently didn't want us. Sixteen ladies were too much for the transit camp. Nor did the beach hospital. But the beach hospital consented in the end to take us in.

I don't remember how we found our way that evening to the beach. It was to become our home. We were to taxi back and forth along that track every day for months, morning, noon and night. We were to break springs and smash radiators against boulders in the dark and suffer much grief on that track before we were done with Tobruk. But I suppose someone acted as guide that first evening. All I remember is floundering through deep sand into a great dingy white tent holding some thirty beds and being told that it was ours for the night.

We were marooned there for a week. A sandstorm that lasted three days engulfed the beach hospital next morning and nothing could move. The commandant was kind. He offered us the hospitality of his mess, and we floundered and fought our way to his hut three times a day, hoping for news, for a message of some kind from Fruchaud, but the only news that came through was of the fighting and it was bad. Rommel had caught us by surprise in the desert south of Benghazi. He had captured our dumps, that I knew. His dash forward might be merely a reconnaissance in force or it might be the beginning of a full-scale offensive. It must have been on the twenty-second or third that I went to VIIIth Army on the road to El Adam, was directed to General de Larminat's tent and there found Koenig, who was a general now in command of the brigade, and at last got news of the unit.

It was coming. It was by way of arriving that evening. It had got lost in the sandstorm. All the world had got lost in the sandstorm. Koenig was fuming with exasperation. Then he laughed. "And you, *chère madame*, is it correct do you think to advance ahead of your troops?"

I don't remember where I last connected with Fruchaud. I think it was in Colonel Matheson's office. I know that we were ordered to stay where we were until the twenty-fifth. On the morning of the twenty-fifth at eight o'clock we were to be at the Monument ready to join the convoy and move on to Timimi.

The Italian war memorial on the Derna road fifteen miles west of Tobruk is one of the few landmarks in that part of the desert. It was always referred to as the Monument. A track led up to it from Acroma fort to the south and our convoy came along the track at about nine o'clock and we moved off with it. The troops under Koenig had moved due west from El Adam and were making across the desert for Mekili. Our orders were to proceed along the

coast road and as we received no counterorder we did so proceed. Our ultimate destination, Fruchaud said, as we moved off, was Giovani Berta in Cyrene.

It was slow going, for an endless succession of British convoys were moving down the road as we moved up. We had to wait sometimes for hours to let them pass. It was growing dark when we reached Gazala and our harassed Commandant Savet called a halt for the night. There was an Italian road-house near our staging ground occupied by a battery of British five-pounders, and I went to see if it would provide shelter for the night. The men were cooking in the shed at the back. There appeared to be no officer about, but the sergeant in charge gave us an empty room and the girls put up their camp beds in it. I slept in my car just outside. It was a wonderful moonlight night with no wind and I lay awake for some time listening to the rumble of the convoys going down the road.

The sergeant had suggested casually that we push on to Derna for the night. There were nice houses in Derna. It was a pretty place. But I said I thought we had better not. Our orders were to open up at Timimi. He may have been joking. I don't think so. I think he knew more than we that Derna was already occupied by the Germans. When we joined the doctors in the field across the road for breakfast, Fruchaud told me that further orders had come from De Larminat. We were to set up the main body of the hospital at Timimi, but a light field section was to move on next day to Mekili. He proposed to do this himself.

The stream of convoys going down toward Tobruk and the fact that none were coming up had puzzled me, but it was only now that I became uneasy. For the road was one unbroken procession of vehicles moving east and it was made up of every kind of unit and it was traveling fast. Guns, supply columns, ambulances, signals, all were making east as fast as they could go. And nothing was going west save ourselves.

Barbara was driving me and I was sitting beside her. She said nothing. We watched fascinated. At last I spoke.

"It looks singularly like a retreat to me. What do you say?"

She mumbled an assent. Just then some lorry drivers catching sight of us shouted and waved.

"They seemed surprised to see us."

"Women in the desert." She was laconic. "Going the wrong way."

We lapsed again into silence. She was thinking, I fancy as I was, of that other retreat in France with its panic flood of refugees. For when I said, "What puzzles me is that it all looks so cheerful," she mumbled, "No civilians about."



We found our arrow and turned in to a field on the right just this side of the crossroads. Timimi, like Solum and most places I've come on in the desert, seemed to be nothing but a mark on the map. If there had ever been a village there, it was gone. The main road went straight on to Derna and Benghazi, but a track, or rather a series of tracks, branched off south to Mekili.

The crossroads were a seething mass of vehicles. From our field I could see the two streams of converging traffic. I sat all afternoon while the boys put up the tents, watching the British Army go past, and I didn't like it. At five, I asked Fruchaud if he had received any communication from De Larminat as I had seen Savet come bumping across the field and go off again. He said no, rather crossly. We had passed a British ambulance station in a roadhouse two miles back so I sent for Barbara and we drove down there. The R.A.M.C. captain was as surprised as most men in the desert when I walked in.

"I'm Mrs. Spears," I said, "and I have my hospital up by the crossroads. I presume you will be evacuating our wounded."

"Afraid not. We're moving off."

"Soon?"

"Sometime this evening."

"Which way?"

"That way." He pointed east as I expected.

"Well, I'd be grateful if you'd send me word before you go. Will you do that?"

"Certainly."

"And could we wash our hands? I see you have washbasins."

"But of course. I'm so sorry."

We had a wash and went back. The boys had put up the reception and operating tents, one ward and a tent for the nurses. Supper was being served in the open; and a British captain was talking to Fruchaud, whose face was thunder. The captain was an officer of the Spears Mission doing liaison with the brigade. He came across to me. I could see he was worried.

"I don't like it," he said.

"I can't say I like it myself."

"You oughtn't to be here."

"We were ordered here. De Larminat's orders."

"I know—and your colonel says he is leaving you here and going to Mekili tomorrow."

"That's it."

"But it's impossible."

"Come and eat," I said, "I'm hungry."

"I'm going to tackle Fruchaud again."

I was sitting in the Ford V-8 with a tin plate of very good stew on my lap when a staff car came bumping wildly across our field and a colonel with red tabs and a white face jumped out and crossed to me.

"Are you Mrs. Spears?"

"I am."

"I've come from VIIIth Army. You are to move back at once to Tobruk."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, tonight. There's going to be a battle here. We want this field for our guns. You must all be gone before dawn."

"You should see my *médecin chef*, Colonel Fruchaud. He's in charge."

We found Fruchaud in his truck. I presented the colonel and explained. It was as I feared. Fruchaud refused to go. He was polite but adamant.

"I'm a French officer under General de Larminat's orders."

The VIIIth Army colonel was equally polite but obviously frantic with fatigue and in a great hurry.

"I quite understand, *mon Colonel*. But you appear to have lost contact with your commanding officer. It is inconceivable that General de Larminat should order you to remain here."

"My orders are to leave the hospital here and to proceed with a light section to Mekili tomorrow."

"But we are not holding Mekili. The French brigade has been ordered to withdraw. There will be no one in Mekili tomorrow."

Fruchaud bowed. "I regret—my orders are as I have said."

I left them and went outside with the young officer of the Spears Mission. The moon had come up; the nurses had gone to bed; the boys had scattered.

"Could you go up to Mekili now tonight," I asked, "find De Larminat, explain and come back?"

"I could certainly—but not in the time. It would take at least four hours to get there by night, even with a moon. And you must be gone before dawn."

Fruchaud and the colonel were still arguing. I saw Barbara wandering about in the moonlight and called to her. We climbed into a car, and again I explained.

"I'm in a spot," I said. "What shall I do? I can override Fruchaud of course as regards ourselves. But if I do we'll never hear the end of it, they'll say we are cowards and ran away. On the other hand we are going to be a damned nuisance to VIIIth Army if we stay. They'll be furious. They might

even order us out of the desert. And I wouldn't blame them. To have a pack of women and some French doctors getting in the way of their guns—"

We looked at it in silence. It wasn't a pleasant situation. All about us was the moonlit desert, behind us the rumble of the VIIIth Army in retreat.

"Fruchaud's right of course. He can't do anything else." She said presently.

"I know, if we hadn't lost contact—"

Again we were silent. At last I came to a decision.

"Dammit all, Barbara. We're British. This is our war. I'm going to do nothing to embarrass VIIIth Army. I don't care what the French think of us."

### III

But I did care. I came to a compromise with Fruchaud. The bulk of the hospital, including all the women, would go back to Tobruk while he moved up to Mekili, with his forward unit. Did the colonel from VIIIth Army want the women to pack off tonight? Yes, he did. Very well. The nurses should be hauled out of bed. Barbara would take the lot in four staff cars. T. W. would stay with me. We would wait while the boys took down the tents and leave with them at dawn.

It was horrid. The unit was split. The French officers went into a huddle once the VIIIth Army colonel had gone. I caught the sound of sarcastic laughter. One thing saved us from a complete breakup. Fruchaud found it impossible to organize his forward unit without six of our British boys. He wanted to *marquer le coup* by sending them all back . . . he couldn't. He had no trained French orderlies.

I went to find Nick Alderson. He was very run-down. He had a large carbuncle on the back of his neck.

"I don't want you to go to Mekili, Nick. You're not fit. Let Michael Rowntree go in your place."

He thought for a moment. I watched his sensitive face in the moonlight. How handsome he was with his fair curly hair. I had been very hard on him, had thought him weak and a prig. The trouble was the old thing, I had no sympathy with conscientious objectors. But I saw that night that he was very honest and was trying with all his heart to lead a good life.

"I must go," he said. "It's my duty."

Perhaps I had a premonition. I thought about him and of his great courtesy to me when the girls had gone. He had been as considerate as a son. I spent the night in his ambulance. He brought me coffee at about five. We moved off just as the sky was growing light. Jibery was silent as we drove away at the head of the convoy. He was to be in charge at Tobruk.

We made very good time; the road was empty; and Barbara with the girls was waiting outside Colonel Matheson's office. They were in great form. They had come to within ten miles of Tobruk before midnight, so had parked by the road and slept in the cars till morning. Then Barbara had cooked them a wonderful breakfast. Sausages and bacon and coffee; all over a fire in a petrol tin half full of sand.

We were to be allotted a wing of No. 62 General Hospital, Colonel Matheson told me, and were to live in our own tents on the beach, near the beach hospital. I had best take my people down to the beach and get them dug in, then call on the colonel of 62 in the morning.

Our strip of land allotted to us along the shore was beautiful. The rocks reminded me of Cornwall. Everyone fell to with a will. Dr. Jibery and the Asquins seemed to think none the worse of us. By supper time most of the tents were up and I was feeling more cheerful. We were at table when an orderly brought a telephone message. It was from De Larminat. The Hadfield-Spears Hospital Unit was ordered to return to Timimi immediately. I handed the message to Jibery and we went outside.

"Very well," I said. "We go back. But I cannot move without informing VIIIth Army. If you will go now with Miss Graham to VIIIth Army, find the A.D.M.S. Brigadier Walker and explain to him, I will be ready to leave in the morning."

Jibery agreed. He and Barbara set out. I told the girls not to unpack, explained to Michael Rowntree what had happened and went to bed. Barbara poked her nose into my tent about ten. They hadn't found Brigadier Walker but had left a message. She came in and sat down on my luggage. We looked at each other. I can see the light now from the hurricane lamp shining on her humorous face. What a mess it was. But there was Michael's head between the tent flaps and his arm holding a bit of paper. "Orders from VIIIth Army. No member of the Hadfield-Spears Hospital is to move from Tobruk. This order supersedes all other orders."

"Get Jibery, Michael."

Jibery came. I gave him the paper.

"We can't go," I said.

"No." He agreed.

"But I will go, Jibery. I must go. This puts me in an impossible position. I must see De Larminat and explain."

Jibery said he would go with me. So I sent T. W. a message to be ready with a car by seven in the morning and we started at seven for Mekili.

Back past the Monument, back through Gazala, back past our staging ground at Timimi. There were guns perhaps but no signs of fighting. No

battle after all, only a retreat in full swing. A hundred trucks were pelting toward us over the desert—ten, twelve, twenty abreast, as we turned south at the crossroads. An officer, who was attempting to regulate the traffic, stared when he saw us, shouted something, but we were gone.

The desert was wide. There were a dozen tracks to choose from. We sped on. A little before noon we came on a French truck and stopped to ask would this track take us to Mekili camp? It was the postman of the brigade. He pulled some letters out of a bag. One was from B. in London. We pushed on through the blinding sun. Black clumps appeared in the dazzling distance. Were they trucks or mirage? We came into Mekili camp at twelve-thirty. It was vast. It was spread out over miles of sand. At last we found De Larminat's caravan.

I was nervous. He saw me get out of the car and opened the door as I mounted the short steep steps, my knees trembling, and looked up at his cold, expressionless, dark face. B. and I had dined with him in Beirut; I liked his wife; they had a charming house; he was a student of Shakespeare and she a gifted painter. What good would that do me now? He was a professional soldier, a commander of troops in the field, hard, irascible, intolerant and reputed to have a great contempt for British methods of warfare; he must be very angry.

He was. He asked me to be seated; offered the one chair by his writing table. His manner was icy.

"I have come to explain why we have not obeyed your orders."

He didn't answer. I looked at his bullet head, his mouth, was it cruel, sensual or merely sardonic? Was there contempt as well as anger in his hard small eyes? I didn't know, couldn't read his face.

"We received this—" I handed him the last message from VIIIth Army and waited; then when he still said nothing added—"So I thought I had better come."

A bugle was calling somewhere out on the sands. There was a sound of wind and lumbering trucks, then a sharp military command.

He spoke at last, told me very succinctly that if he could not give orders to my hospital and have them obeyed, it was of no use to him; I had best take it back to England.

I replied that I understood his annoyance but felt I was in no way to blame. I had brought the unit to the desert under his orders and had only one wish, to obey them. If I received contradictory orders what was I to do? My position was impossible.

If he was mollified, he betrayed no sign of it, but his anger shifted a moment later to VIIIth Army. Brigadier Walker had no business to interfere.

The disposal of the units of the Free French forces was not his affair. This sort of thing was intolerable.

I couldn't very well point out to the dark powerful man that he himself was under VIIIth Army. I was too much afraid of him. To prolong the discussion was I felt useless. I would go back, I said, to VIIIth Army next day and ask Brigadier Walker never again to send orders direct to my unit, then rose to go. I asked him to believe that I bitterly regretted what had happened.

He bade me good-by with courtesy but didn't unbend, his face was stony as I went down the steps.

"I'm not certain," I said to T. W. as we drove away, "that we are not going to be given the sack. Now we must find Fruchaud."

Mekili camp was a camp in a bad dream. We rolled and rattled from one group of tents to another. I saw Koenig standing afar off like some tall queer bird of the desert but he didn't come near us. Someone gave us food. I think it was Sneed-Cox, the British liaison officer. Someone else told us at last where to look for Fruchaud. He was up forward. We must leave Mekili fort on our left, follow—I was obsessed by the necessity of seeing Fruchaud. It was impossible to allow him to nurse resentment and contempt for the British members of the staff. The unit would never be the same again, if I didn't put things right with him now. How beastly it all was. If De Larminat really meant—I was so wretched that I didn't listen to the instructions that were being given to T. W. as to the track we were to follow, and didn't think of asking for an escort.

Jibery had left us. He was in a hurry to get back to Tobruk and a friend had given him a lift, so T. W. and I launched ourselves out into the farther desert alone with the vaguest of notions as to where we were going. It was a silly thing to do. Mekili was a very advanced post. There was nothing between it and the enemy save a stretch of empty sand. We only realized how empty it was when we had left the fort some miles behind us. Not a truck anywhere on the horizon. Nothing moving in all that vast expanse save ourselves. No sign of any living thing. And the sun was down, the sky was crimson beyond the darkening sand. How lonely it was.

"If you push on much further, T. W., we'll find ourselves in the German lines."

But she was in one of her obstinate moods. "Let's try over there. He may be behind those sand hills."

"O. K."

We turned north. It was almost dark by now. Suddenly she stopped. "My God, we're in the middle of a mine field."

We were. We backed out along our own tracks. Even then she wouldn't

give in. "Just one more go. I can see a track now, quite a decent track, don't you see it? It must lead somewhere."

We found them in the end. They were camped in a hollow between the sand hills by the dry bed of a stream, and were just sitting down to supper, on the bank. A pleasant scene. Hajali was ladling out his excellent bully beef stew, there was wine, a pot was bubbling on the fire. Colonel Fruchaud spread a coat for me on the ground. Nick brought me a steaming plate and a brimming mug. I was hungry. Everyone was hungry. We ate like wolves, and suddenly I knew that I was happy again. Completely, blissfully happy.

I told Fruchaud after supper of the orders from VIIIth Army and my painful interview with De Larminat. The moon had risen and we walked a little way over the pebbles up the bed of the stream. He seemed to understand my difficulty. He was glad, he said, that I had come. There could be no doubt in De Larminat's mind of my courage and readiness to obey. We parted friends. The boys gathered round to wave cheerful good-bys. Madame Butherne's good fair face beamed in the gloaming. My heart was light as we trundled away. T. W. and I drove home by moonlight and reached Tobruk beach at 1 A.M.

It wasn't until some weeks later that I heard how De Larminat had refused for two days to obey VIIIth Army orders and withdraw from Mekili. He had expressed himself very caustically, they said, on the subject of the British retreat.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### I

THE 62nd General Hospital occupied a series of buildings built round four sides of a wide empty square just outside Tobruk. It had nine hundred beds, good surgeons and doctors but no nurses, and a very inadequate staff of nursing orderlies. Though the glare in the square was blinding, the wards were dark and the wounded lay all day in twilight for the windows had been painted over with blue paint.

My heart sank when the C.O. took me into the block that was being handed over to us. It had eighty beds and most of them were filled with bad chest cases, many of them Germans. The men were ghosts. They lay in long rows, propped up on dingy pillows panting softly and stared through the gloom out of sunken eyes. Silent men, they didn't speak to each other, each one was alone, in the no man's land between life and death. Stretcher-bearers were bringing other silent men from the operating rooms across the square. The orderlies lifted the unconscious forms swathed in white bandages on to empty beds and laid them between gray sheets stiff with dry blood. The sheets it seemed were seldom changed; the beds were never empty for long. There were too many tenants waiting. They came from Derna, Gazala, Acroma and El Adam. They came in a hurry down the long desert tracks, and they were hurried on to make room for others. Some joined the cavalcade that swung down to the crazy jetty and were carried aboard the hospital ship that called twice a week from Alex, waiting far out in the harbor beyond the sunken hulks of other ships that had traveled for the last time the same smiling sea, some were carried on alone only a little way to the morgue. Whichever it was, immediately a patient was gone his successor moved into his bed. So how, the C.O. asked me, could the sheets be changed? There were three thousand soiled sheets waiting now to be washed and no one to wash them and no water to wash with. He eyed me askance.

I went back to the beach to fetch the nurses.

"You haven't a high opinion," I said to them, "of French military hospitals, but you are going to work now in a British hospital that beats any French hospital I've ever seen for squalor. And you are not to grumble.



The VIIIth Army doesn't want us here, nor does the C.O. of the hospital. We've got to justify our existence by the work we do and not be a nuisance. Don't criticize, don't badger the orderlies, they are all overworked. If you can't get what you want, make do without. The surgeons will come round. Once they see you at work they'll be only too glad to give you their big cases. Remember you are the only nursing sisters in this part of the world. All the nurses of 62 are in Cairo or Merza Matruh. Come along—and no grumbling, understand?"

The nurses played up. Nothing could make those dreary wards pleasant, but they set to work with four of our own F.A.U. boys and had transformed our block in twenty-four hours. I remember Irving's grim face as I helped her remake the beds. She had coaxed a couple of dozen clean sheets from the corporal in charge of the block. It was a case of changing the worst. As we bent together over the dark evil-smelling linen she would draw in her breath with a hiss. "No, Edith, not this one; it will have to do."

We settled down. We were to work there until the middle of May. When the Tobruk box followed the example of Gazala and Knightsbridge and Bir Hakin and shut itself in, we were shut out and moved to Solum.

With eight nurses for eighty beds it was easy to do a good nursing job. Even without Nancy Wright and Madame Butherne, who had joined Fruchaud in the forward unit, we were more than adequately staffed. For there was little or no work in the theater and reception. Our French patients were almost all operated on by Fruchaud before they reached us and the British were dealt with in the operating rooms by their own people. Commandant Durbach, who had come back to us, was kept kicking his heels. The British surgical and medical staff were polite but didn't require his assistance. It was the same with the nurses. We offered to do more, but the C.O. wouldn't have us in the other blocks. He accepted the F.A.U. boys, however, and two were allotted as orderlies to each of the ten wards.

Gradually the surgeons came round as I had hoped. Some chest cases they had despaired of pulled through. When the German and Italian planes came over as they often did to bomb the harbor, the sisters showed no interest but went quietly on with their work. There was a big raid one day—about twenty planes; they got an oil tanker and a couple of lighters, and a bomb landed close by the end of our ward. A part of the ceiling came down, and the patients were frightened. It was teatime. Evelyn and Edith were on duty, and John Marley, a very small member of the F.A.U. who wore always a vague smile on his childish face, was serving tea. He found to his surprise when he came in with a cup of tea in each hand that the beds were empty. The patients were lying under them on the floor, so he went on serving

tea to them where they were, on his hands and knees, and by the time he got round the ward the raid was over and Edith and Evelyn were laughing at him as they got the patients back into bed and some of the patients were laughing too, for Edith lets out the most infectious, irresistible crescendo of giggles when she laughs that I have ever heard.

Later that day twenty British sailors came in suffering from shock and third-degree burns. Flaming like torches they had jumped into the icy harbor. I am told, and I believe it, that there is no greater agony. They were brought to our ward. And after that there was no hanging back on the part of the British surgical staff. We had few French wounded, never more than twenty at a time, but the most serious operation cases among the British were sent to us to be nursed, our beds were always full and the ward throbbed with the peculiar subdued excitement that accompanies the fight against death, pain and despair.

It was a good moment for us to be in Tobruk for the morale that winter and spring was low. The war wasn't going well and the men had lost confidence in their chiefs. I used to go over to the sergeants' mess in the beach hospital to listen in to the news from London and came to expect an inevitable announcement of some serious reverse. At last, one day, I heard Mr. Churchill's voice and it said, "I have to announce a great disaster. It is an imperial disaster. Singapore has fallen."

There were half a dozen British N.C.O.'s in the tent. We looked at each other and said nothing. As I went back to our camp I thought of the men scattered all over the desert who had been listening in. I saw them in small lonely camps, in caves in the sand hills, in the isolated trucks that had become their desert homes, tuning in to the B.B.C. to hear the voice of the Prime Minister coming to them from England to announce the fall of Singapore.

I do not suggest that they gave way to despair. The war has proved that belief in defeat is incompatible with the British character. They could take it, and they did, these nomad troops of the desert, but the morale of the VIIIth Army as we saw it in hospital was so low that Edith would fly into a temper with her patients and trounce them roundly, then come to me saying:

"I'm worried to death. I didn't know our men could be like this. They all want to go home and grumble all day about the mess G.H.Q. is making of everything. They say they don't care any more what happens. They've had enough of the desert. I give it to them, I do. Sometimes I make them laugh and they say, 'Well, sister, if you can stand it I guess we can.' But it makes you sick to hear them go on about Rommel. There's only one hero in this war and that's Rommel and when I say what about our own generals they

say—'Archie Wavell was all right.' But they don't seem to know the name of anyone else and some days it's all I can do to get a smile out of any of them."

We saved I know many British lives; and the presence of the girls was a tonic to the men; and so we established our right to be near the desert war. But I didn't know to what extent our nurses had earned the respect of the authorities at G.H.Q. until we had done the retreat to El Alamein and I saw the D.M.S. General Tomlinson in Cairo and he said: "I am going to use your unit as a lever in forcing the VIIIth Army to allow nurses in future to go forward in the desert."

## II

General de Larminat in the meantime had consented to withdraw from Mekili and had moved his column back to El Azrac, and our forward unit with Fruchaud in command had moved with him.

They put up their tents at El Azrac and I went up to see them as soon as I heard they had arrived. I say El Azrac but there was as usual nothing to show that such a place existed. We followed a track marked by petrol tins painted with the *Croix de Lorraine* west from Acroma, and out into the desert and eventually found the Spears arrow. There were some South African tanks to the right of the track, our tents to the left, otherwise nothing but sand dotted with camel-scrub, and the wide high sky; a lonely piece of desert.

But the unit was in high spirits. Madame Butherne was giving first aid to all the invisible troops in the region and Fruchaud had had quite a lot of work, British and South African casualties as well as French. The Stukas came over quite often, they said, and showed me with pride how well they had arranged their camp with a slit trench by the side of each small tent.

Nick still looked washed out but seemed to have enjoyed the trek from Mekili. They had traveled by night and it had been exciting. He told me a story as we sat drinking tea in the winter sun.

They had received their movement orders late one afternoon and had been told to fetch rations that evening from Supply for nine days. So he had gone with a truck to collect the rations, been shown a series of dumps and told to help himself. It was growing dark, the camp was all in confusion and the wind was blowing the sand in all directions. There was a mound of biscuit boxes, another of bully beef tins, another of sardines and so on. The first dump he came on was of pineapple cubes, and a black man, a

*tirailleur* was sitting on top of the pile of tins. Nick noticed that he was gray in the face, but he was silent and Nick was in a hurry, and everyone was shouting and rushing about in the windy dark, so he passed on. But when he had collected his other rations, he thought of the pineapple cubes and as he liked pineapple very much he went back to get some, and he found the black man lying on top of the heap of pineapple cubes and he was dead. He had toppled over and died while Nick was gone and the wind was covering him with sand and no one was paying any attention to him. Nick hesitated, he said; should he take some pineapple cubes or not? He decided not and drove away, leaving the black man from the far-away Chad, lying on the mound of pineapple cubes with the sand drifting over him.

I didn't see Nick again. Michael Rowntree came to me some days later in Tobruk to tell me that he had been killed. I went up next day to El Azrac to visit his grave, and hear what had happened. A German plane had come over and had dropped a stick of bombs, aimed apparently at the South African tanks the other side of the track. Nick like the other members of the unit had obeyed orders and jumped immediately, when the first bomb dropped, into his slit trench, but one of the bombs had landed in the exact middle of it. Madame Butherne had come running with the boys a minute later. They had gathered him up, she told me. And then she added what gave the story of Nick's death a special poignancy. "He wasn't well," she said, "as you know. But a British officer came in the day before, desperately wounded, the only hope was a blood transfusion, and Nick gave him two pints of his blood; afterwards on the way back to his hut he fainted."

"Did the British officer live?"

"No, he died."

"But Nick didn't give his blood in vain, Michael."

"No."

They had buried him in the desert near the camp, but they were moving on to Bir Hakim—so he would lie alone.

I visited his grave again after the battle of El Alamein, when we came back for the second time to Tobruk. The armies of the desert had swept past. The war had flowed back and forth over the place where he lay, leaving behind its ugly deposit of charred trucks, broken tanks, disabled guns and wrecked planes; and all the sand as far as the eye could see was strewn with petrol tins, as an untidy chicken run is strewn with droppings, but Nick's grave had not been disturbed. It lay between the graves of two of the Fighting French who had died in Madame Butherne's tent. It was right that he should lie between them, for he was French on his mother's side and though he would not go out to fight, he gave his blood generously

to a British soldier before his life was taken from him by an enemy whom he had been commanded by God and his conscience to love.

It is a small matter and almost too cruelly trivial to mention, but his death removed what was left of the ill feeling that had remained among the French members of the unit for ourselves since Timimi.

### III

It is a strange thing to grow fond of a place whose every stone shouts aloud the brutal horrors of war. Alan Moorhead in his *African Trilogy* describes Tobruk immediately before its fall in '42 as hideous and squalid. "It was difficult," he writes, "to see any tradition in this squalor or feel the sense of history and heroic deeds. The depressing, degrading leveling influence of war had made the place accursed." But to me it was eloquent, as eloquent as the weary hulk of a ship washed up by the sea after a long losing battle against a storm. It had the absorbing interest of a human document. A queer grim tragic beauty seemed to play over its ugly ruins. And I became attached to it. Was it because of the men who lived their strange life under its stones and asked me so wistfully to bring the girls to their shelters for supper? I don't think so. Navy House was broken in half. Captain Smith, who welcomed us to his mess in '42, was dead when we went back after El Alamein. He had lived through the siege, been transferred and had asked, he told me, to come back again to Navy House. Tobruk he said had become like home to him. A quiet man with the deep gaze of some sailors, he stayed behind to blow up the flimsy jetty he had constructed of old planks and barrels when Rommel's tanks swept down the escarpment, and he blew himself up with it and died of his wounds.

There were many others still there when we arrived in '42 who had been through the siege. Men of Coastal Command or A.C.A.C. Some had built themselves snug little houses in deep wadies by the shore, tiny hidden villages invisible from the air that went clambering down steep narrow paths to the sea and reminded one of miniature villages in Devonshire. Their inhabitants—each claimed by the way to be the oldest inhabitant of Tobruk—were very house-proud and would say of the siege, "Oh it wasn't so bad," and tell how they had distilled their own sea water and how ships would slip into harbor during the night with supplies and then like as not they would add, "But we won't hold it again. You'll see, there won't be a second siege of Tobruk." Many said that, so many that we were dismayed. But when I reported their sayings in Cairo at the end of March, Cairo only laughed.

Yes; I grew fond of Tobruk, it became a part of my permanent life, the life that I carry with me from the past. When I think of it now I have the same nostalgic longing that comes when I remember St. Jean le Bassel. But with the thought of Tobruk comes a keener pang—for I know that I shall never go back. St. Jean was an insignificant little place, Tobruk was immense—an immense drama in stone. I have been back to St. Jean, but I could never find my way to Tobruk again. It is gone, as truly as if its rugged promontory had slipped into the sea dragging with it the modest Virgin that some men in khaki had lifted so carefully from her ruined altar and placed beside the broken door of the church.

The VIIIth Army is gone from Tobruk. The British Navy can ignore now that perilous harbor with its mute tragic burden. Some day, perhaps, other sailors will come to lift those sunken ships. But I shan't go back, and so for me it will never change nor the heroism of its siege be dimmed, nor the shame of its fall. Always as long as I live I shall be aware of its men who are buried below the escarpment and the men who went down and still seem to be waiting beside their ships under the waters of the still harbor to be raised by the sound of a trumpet blast.

I lived on the beach at Tobruk with the main part of the unit but went to Bir Hakim every few days. T. W. moved up there early in February and stayed, save for a week or two, now and then when Rosie relieved her, until the women were all ordered out at the end of May. Alan Moorhead states that there were two women in Bir Hakim during the final battle but I don't think that is true. There were four until the Germans launched their big attack. Nancy Smith, Madame Butherne and Kit Tatham-Warter of the Hadfield-Spears Unit and Susan Travers who was driving one of Koenig's cars. Madame Asquins had been there with her husband for a short time, but she didn't like it so they came back to Tobruk quite early.

All the valiant four were ordered out when the situation became very serious, much to their disgust. But Susan Travers got back. General de Larminat, who had established his H.Q. in the Solum region, sent her up with a letter to Koenig and once she got there she stayed until the end. She came out with the garrison on the night of June 12 driving Koenig's Ford van. He had had two cars damaged under him and was standing in the lane when she came along, so she drove him out. I went down the lane some months later. It was still clearly marked with wire because of the mine fields to either side and it cannot have been a pleasant drive with the Germans at the end of it machine-gunning the convoy by the light of the burning trucks. But I have been told that Susan was as cool as if driving down

Caser el nil in Cairo and I am sure it is true. For she is an intrepid woman and the great admiration we all feel for her was T. W.'s one consolation. Furious at having been ordered out, and very envious of Susan, T. W. forgave her for doing what she would so have liked to do herself because she admired her so much.

We followed F. track from El Adam when we first began to go to Bir Hakim—turning south before we reached Knightsbridge and passing Abu-Mafis on the left and the rhinoceros signs of the VIIth Armored Division on our right to enter the camp by the north gate. But it was shorter to climb the escarpment south of El Adam and cut straight across country and it amused Barbara to drive by compass so we took to going that way. I was always a little nervous on these drives for Barbara's was only a Boy Scout compass, and I would watch anxiously for the wrecked Stuka that was the one landmark on the forty kilometer stretch of desert, but we only got half lost once and were prevented from shooting south past the camp by a French patrol that waved us to come back.

Life in the forward unit was austere but exhilarating. There was a wonderful feeling of freedom and camaraderie, curious perhaps since the whole camp was shut in by mine fields and the thirty-six hundred troops dug into the great sandy box were all but invisible. We were told by friends in the R.A.F. that the camouflage was first-class and I know that Koenig's orders in regard to tentage were severe. Our smart new operating theater had to go. It was too good a mark for the Stukas. Colonel Fruchaud had a small tent which he shared with Père Boileau; the women and other officers slept to begin with in kutoons. All were well dug in. You dug a hole in the desert like a grave but wider, then put your canvas over the top about level with the ground. There was room for a camp bed inside and a foot to spare. Your belongings you kept on shelves cut in the earth. But as time went on the various members of the unit dug themselves underground houses ten feet square, lined the walls with petrol tins, collected scrap iron from the desert wreckage for roofing and made themselves snug. It was nice and warm, Rosie tells me, underground. The boys had rigged up a wonderful system of electric light. Most luxurious. But Bir Hakim was a great place for sandstorms; they lasted sometimes four or five days and after a night of storm you would find the entrance to your house blocked and would have to be dug out. You never washed, of course.

We were engulfed in a sandstorm I remember on my first visit just as we passed through the gate in the wire and it took us an hour to find the unit. Dim huddled figures would loom through the yellow fog. A chasseur, a legionnaire, a spahi, and we would ask, "Where is Spears?"—for the troops

called the unit now by that name—and an arm would point into the blind distance. Then, just as we were beginning to despair, T. W. popped like a rabbit out of a hole and led us floundering to Fruchaud's hut, and there he was in the middle of the storm, in a dingy, ice-cold tent with a rope down the middle of it and all his clothes and Père Boileau's flung across it and the sand whirling in under the flapping canvas and he had a chair with a canvas table in front of it and the table and floor and earthen shelves were strewn with sheets of paper all covered with sand and he was writing his book on war surgery.

There wasn't much comfort at Bir Hakim, but the food, thanks to Père Boileau and Hajali the Lebanese cook, was wonderful. How they managed it I don't know, but the unit lived like fighting cocks. The officers' mess was in one of the three-ton Bedfords—the kitchen in a sand pit just outside—and I knew that whenever I went to see them I would have a far better lunch than I would get at any corps headquarters. No cold bully beef with pickles and tinned peaches were served under that Bedford hood. Hot succulent stew with onions, hot pease pudding, *pommes frites*, *crème au chocolat*, red wine and beer and coffee—large steaming mugs of strong coffee with thick creamy condensed milk and sugar. And what a jolly lot of ruffians they looked sitting on the long benches. Fruchaud would place me on his right, Barbara on his left with Thibaut opposite.

Thibaut was a new member. He had come from Damascus to join us as second surgeon. He had the figure and the walk of a Spanish *torero* and the bravery—as we came to know. Père Boileau among the officers was that rare creature, a very brave coward. Never I believe in all the weeks that he remained at Bir Hakim did he cease being frightened, never would he consent to come back to the comparative peace and security of Tobruk. Always at mealtimes he sat nearest the open end of the Bedford and if a bomb fell even at a great distance, he was out in a second in one great leap and into the next trench. Two minutes later he would be back again, a sheepish grin on his pallid visage, and would growl, "*C'est plus fort que moi*"—and go on with his lunch.

#### IV

It is not my purpose to attempt to describe the war in the desert. I could not write of military operations if I would. I write of what I saw, and we saw no battles save battles in the air. We saw the wreckage they left behind, one picked one's way through the garbage of war that was spread over a thousand square miles of sand; and we saw the men who took part in them, before and after they went into battle. Many men talked to us. Friends



of the girls found their way down to the beach from Gazala and Knightsbridge and we heard sorry tales of tanks abandoned undamaged and full of petrol, of units that had broken and fled when there was no need for flight and many complaints of VIIIth Army and G.H.Q. Cairo. One story going round Tobruk was of a gentleman in red tabs who arrived from Alex by sea and stepping ashore called for a taxi to take him to the best hotel.

An invigorating friendly place, the desert. Crossing and recrossing the part that lay between Tobruk and El Adam, Bir Hakim and Knightsbridge, Rosie and I would stop and pass the time of day with the men who lived far out on the sand in lonely trucks and they would ask us in and give us mugs of tea, and talk to us about their girls or show us photographs of their wives and children, and they would look with shy admiration at Rosie and say—"It's very surprising to meet young ladies like you, miss, in the desert." And one day when we got lost and she went up to a truck to ask the way, I heard a voice from inside call out, "Am I dreamin' or do I hear the voice of angels speaking?" And a grizzled head appeared wearing a broad astonished grin.

But Bir Hakim camp was most invigorating of all. And that to me was very important. For in Bir Hakim I found again the old spirit of the French Army of 1914-1918. Was it Koenig's doing? De Larminat's? Or was it that the handful of men who had cut themselves off from their nation were at last free, and had come in sight of their goal? They had fought their compatriots in Syria and gnashed their teeth, some had fought the Italians in Eritrea, now after months of waiting they were going to fight the enemy who had marched on Paris and turned a marshal of France into a coward. They were still only a handful of men, and at that a motley collection. Two battalions of the Foreign Legion, one regiment of Marines (*Fusiliers Marins*), one battalion of marine infantry, spahis, North Africans, blacks from the Pacific; but there was a spirit in them that made them alike and not like the men we had met in Lorraine. These men were tough, they were hard, they were aching for a fight and would know how to take punishment. They were like the poilus of 1914.

Strange to recall how little we suspected what was coming. We knew that a great battle was preparing. That we must have known for we watched the supplies pouring into Tobruk, and early in March De Larminat asked me to come up to Bir Hakim to lunch with him, and after lunch he asked me to prepare the unit for a much more arduous life than any we had known hitherto. He seemed to have forgiven me for the Timimi business and spoke with suppressed excitement. I must dispense for one thing with a large part of our equipment, and I must select from among my staff only those who

were fit and willing to undergo serious hardships. We would travel far, he said, and only those who could endure great heat and thirst and fatigue must venture to come. So we sent a large part of our heavy equipment including most of the beds and bedding back to Alexandria to be put in store and I put the question to the girls. Were they prepared to follow the brigade across three thousand miles of desert in blazing heat?

I had had a message from the Minister of State, Middle East, that B. had been knighted by the King, appointed Minister to Syria and the Lebanon, was on his way back and expected me to meet him in Cairo on the fifteenth of March. I told them this and explained that I had to go. Barbara, too, was leaving. She was going to join Freya Stark in Baghdad, and Cynthia was going to America to her mother whom she hadn't seen since St. Jean le Bassel, but I would be back. Fruchaud had promised, I said, to warn me in time so that I could be with them for the great advance. And I know that De Larminat, though he didn't say so, expected to be in hot pursuit of the Afrika Corps round El Agheila by the middle of June. But when I did get back on June 11, the unit had moved, not forward, but back to Solum, the hospital tents were set up in a field by the shore and Koenig was preparing to come out of Bir Hakim the next night at the head of his troops.

## CHAPTER XIX

### I

THE story of the sortie from Bir Hakim came to us in fragments. It was brought by the wounded, by the men who had followed Koenig down the narrow lane between the wire and fought their way through the German lines with hand grenades and bayonets, to fall and be picked up in the lurid confusion and loaded pell-mell into ambulances, trucks, anything that was handy. We had it from excited mouths that were twisted with pain, it came in gurgles as the blood spurted, in soft whispers and savage ejaculation and it sounded through the ether masks of the theater; it was a story of triumph.

The atmosphere in the hospital was tense on the eleventh. Wild rumors flew round the camp. The garrison of Bir Hakim had surrendered, had been overrun, had been killed to a man. But the wounded began to arrive in the early morning and soon all the hospital was filled with the sound of jubilant voices calling to each other from beds and stretchers; greetings, curses, shouts of defiance, and laughter and groans all mixed together.

"Jacques!"

"Pierre!"

"Comment va?"

"On t'a eu, mon vieux."

"Nom de Dieu, que je souffre! Mais c'était beau, hein?"

"Dites, madame. Avez-vous vu un Fusilier Marin qui s'appelle Marcel—un petit roux? Il a tué deux à la bayonnette et puis je l'ai perdu."

"T'a vu les salauds avec leur mitrailleuses au bout là? Marcel a été à côté, pauvre bougre. C'était étroit, fichtre. Pas moyen de passer à cause des mines."

"Et les camions, qui flambaient! Quel le bagarre."

"Et le capitaine?"

"Sais pas. Je l'ai vu debout au milieu—puis rien."

"Y a eu de la casse."

"Forcement."

"Faut pas s'en plaindre. Nous sommes là, quoi?"

The reception tent was out of control. They wouldn't lie still. Each arrival

was greeted with shouts, questions. They laughed while we dressed their wounds—they couldn't stop talking.

Koenig came in the afternoon. I saw him standing in the middle of the compound with General Catroux and went up to him. He was unshaved, his khaki beret was over one eye, he was laughing convulsively, he swayed on uncertain feet as he bowed to me, he looked slightly mad.

I took him across to one of the wards and as he entered the door of the tent a shout went up and the men rose in their beds. They couldn't all lift themselves up, and they couldn't all see him. Some had thick bandages over their eyes and some were encased in plaster. But it was as if all had leaped to their feet. And he went to them waving his arms and laughing and called them each by name and took their hands in his and all the tent was in a tumult of joy. It was the same in each ward.

I have become too accustomed to surgical wards filled with battle casualties to be easily moved; the visits of commanding officers have ceased to be events in our hospital life. But this was different from anything I had seen; this was not the visit of condolence of a general to men who had been sacrificed; it was a celebration. It was a meeting of friends who had waited a long time for the test that was to prove to them that they were what they claimed to be; now they had come through the test and had won the right to be called the fighting men of France. My eyes were wet as I watched the carnival of General Koenig with his wounded men.

He was criticized later. When the Gazala line was broken, and the IIInd South African Division under Pinner came down the road to join the swollen garrison in Tobruk, and Rommel drove his massed tanks east along the Capuzzo track through the British armor, and the Guards marched out of the Knightsbridge box and Acroma fell and El Adam; and Tobruk was surrounded and shut itself in, only to fall open again like a thing of cardboard; then in the dismay and humiliation and rage of defeat there were British spirits mean enough to decry the effort of the Fighting French and attack Koenig and blame him for holding out too long or not long enough; and some went so far as to criticize him for coming out at the head of his troops instead of waiting to be the last. But I know what his troops felt about that, for I saw and I asked myself during our long trek back to Alex what Koenig and De Larminat, who had expected to be pursuing the Afrika Corps toward Agheila must be feeling, now that they found themselves engulfed with their little French force in the headlong retreat of the VIIIth Army.

They didn't tell me. No French officer or private soldier ever allowed himself any criticism in my presence of British leadership. Tact? Consideration for our feelings? Perhaps. Hot words were exchanged, the gossips said,

between De Larminat and the British command. It wouldn't be surprising if it were true. He is a difficult man, De Larminat, almost as difficult as General de Gaulle. He may very well have poured contempt on our methods of warfare. If he did, it didn't affect the morale of his troops. There was no defeatism in Koenig's brigade.

We went a year later to visit the cemetery at Bir Hakim and wandered over the deserted camp, poking about in the debris among the empty tins. Rosie wanted to find the site of the hospital and her underground house. And we found or believed that we found the place where Thibaut had set up his operating theater during those final days and the hollow where he had laid his wounded. For Thibaut had stayed behind when the forward unit was ordered out and had gone on working up to the end with an assistant and two orderlies from the *Groupe Sanitaire Divisionnaire*. And he had performed twenty-one big operations during the last day with bombs falling all round him and had put them on stretchers in a hollow in the sand to wait until night when he proposed to bring them out in ambulances with the column. But a bomb fell on them toward evening and killed the lot. They are buried in a common grave in the Bir Hakim cemetery. Standing by the grave you can look out over the desert for many miles, and you will probably see what seem to be trucks moving across the dazzling sand but it will only be a mirage.

## II

There had been changes in our officer staff. Colonel Fruchaud had asked to be transferred, during my absence, on grounds of ill health and had left two weeks before the battle. Colonel Vernier, former C.O. of the A.C.L., had taken his place, and Durbach, who had never been happy with us, had replaced Vernier once again at the A.C.L. Colonel Vernier was to remain *médecin chef* of the hospital until the end of the war. A short thickset sturdy little man with pleasant blue eyes, a plaintive voice and an impish sense of humor, he was a very different type from Fruchaud. Younger, less distinguished as a surgeon and a less polished man of the world, he had been in the French Colonial Service and had behind him a long and varied experience in French West Africa. He was an ardent Gaullist. There was a warmth about him, a frank friendliness and enthusiasm that won my confidence at once. I needed to have confidence. We were beginning our partnership in difficult circumstances. Though we were both too sanguine by temperament to believe in disaster, things did look pretty bad. A second French brigade under General Cazou had moved up to Capuzzo only to be overrun by German armor. It was said that VIIIth Army had neglected to

warn them of the oncoming enemy. It was said that all the British tanks were destroyed, that the VIIth Armored Division had ceased to exist, that General Ritchie had been recalled, that Auchinleck had come up to the desert to take command of VIIIth Army, that Tobruk would not be defended. We didn't know what to believe. All we knew, Vernier and I, was that we were jointly responsible for the unit and must act together in unison.

The disaster we didn't believe in was not long in coming. I was sitting at tea in the mess tent just one week after Bir Hakim when Commandant Reilinger, medical inspector for De Larminat, walked in and announced the fall of Tobruk. I knew Reilinger well. He was a French doctor who had lived for years in the States and talked English with a strong American accent. The Tobruk garrison, he added, of thirty thousand men including the Guards' brigade had been taken prisoner.

I was very angry, so angry that I got up and cried out:

"How dare you say such a thing? I will not allow you, Reilinger, or anyone to come into this camp and spread such rumors. It's not true. It cannot be true."

I hurried from the tent. He followed. He apologized. He said he wouldn't have repeated the story if De Larminat himself hadn't told him that it was a fact. I still didn't believe it. And when next day I found it was true, I couldn't take it in, it didn't make sense. Tobruk had held out before for six months. It was the largest supply base in the desert. We had seen the supplies pouring into it all these past months. If Cairo didn't mean to defend it, why the two million gallons of petrol, the three thousand new Bedfords? Why order the Guards into the trap? But Cairo had decided to defend it, someone said, but too late. What did that mean? No, someone else said, that wasn't it at all. Cairo had decided not to defend the place, but London had overruled Cairo at the last moment.

I hated all this talk. I had a foolish, fatuous, but none the less agonized sense of personal outrage. Tobruk was immense, to surrender it without a fight was terrible.

We moved back to Garola, the other side of Merza Matruh. We put up our tents between the railway line and the sea. We stayed there three days or four or five. I don't know. No patients arrived. The girls went in swimming, lay on the beach. The beach was strewn I remember with bruised waterlogged oranges from a wrecked ship. An untidy depressing beach.

T. W. came back one day from Matruh to say the workshops were closing down. No more spare parts to be had. All the services were packing up. She was laconic as was our habit. The Germans seemed to be pretty close. We

might as well fill up with petrol. They had told her at the transit camp that the New Zealand division was on its way up from the Delta.

I must have been worried for I remember my feeling of relief when I heard that the New Zealanders were arriving. I had last seen them at Baalbek in Syria.

We sent all our trucks to the petrol point to fill up. No orders came from De Larminat. We didn't know where he was. We seemed to be forgotten. I consulted Vernier and went in search of VIIIth Army and Brigadier Walker. They were behind us somewhere, but where? No one seemed to know. I went down the road, on and on, I passed Fuka and Bagush. No one could tell me what I wanted to know.

There was no congestion on the road but all the desert to either side was an endless staging ground with units on the move. At last I saw the VIIIth Army sign, and turned up a track toward the sea and came on some scattered tents. A group of dejected figures in khaki was just disappearing into one of them with Brigadier Walker on its edge. He saw me and crossed over and said in a whisper through the window of the car, "If you don't mind waiting. There's a conference on. They are going to decide things. I'll be able to advise you afterwards." So I waited and presently he came out of the tent and said I was to take my unit without delay to Amariha camp outside Alex. He would let them know that we were coming.

I went back to Garola and told Vernier. Should we wait and try to find Reilinger? I remembered Timimi. But where should we look for Reilinger? The French brigade had vanished. Michael Rowntree reported that the Matruh hospital had closed down. The nurses had already gone. There seemed no point in hanging about. We broke camp and moved off early next morning reaching Dabaa at nine o'clock. The girls were cheerful but hungry. The Ark, N.A.A.F.I.'s extra splendid roadhouse, was crowded but they made room for us and we had a superb breakfast of bacon and eggs and bread and orange marmalade.

A little farther down the road we came on the brigade. Vernier found Koenig and told him we were making for Amariha camp and we moved on through Alamein and by-passing Alexandria, arrived at Amariha. Amariha was a fine camp twelve miles or so from Alex on the road to Cairo but no one had been warned there that we were coming. They were crowded out, the commandant's office said. And who were we anyhow? I explained the somewhat peculiar character of our formation. Amariha still looked dubious. They could not, however, but admit that I was Lady Spears, wife of the British Minister in Syria and that I had with me fifty genuine Britishers—so they told us to go across to Ikingi camp and there we found an empty

dilapidated bungalow with a field in front of it enclosed in wire and we moved into both on the first day of July.

### III

We stayed there a week. It was an interesting week in the calendar of the desert war, that first week in July, '42. The middle of it is known as Ash Wednesday because G.H.Q. Cairo chose that day to make a bonfire of its records, and it was quite an interesting week for us, but very disagreeable. In fact it was the most disagreeable week for me of all the war.

We had lost touch with the brigade and had of course nothing to do. It was very hot. The empty bungalow was filthy, there was no light and no water, its reservoir was dry. We put up some small tents in the yard to sleep in and every day and all day we were enveloped in a sand and dust storm, not because of any wind from the desert, but from the trucks that were rushing down from the desert, and every day area H.Q. in Alex was pestering us about our latrines. The VIIIth Army was in full retreat at our back door, Alex was being emptied, the great car parks were spilling their thousands of new trucks into the road, but area took a passionate interest in our latrines.

It had always been so in VIIIth Army. On the Tobruk beach, at El Azrac and Bir Hakim, at Solum and even during our brief stay at Garola, solemn officers had turned up to inspect and condemn our latrines. They weren't deep enough, they weren't big enough, they weren't dug according to standard. Fruchaud would fly into a rage. He had his own ideas about latrines and they didn't coincide with the British. Now here they were again, the hygiene squad, in Ikingi. We must make a proper latrine according to the prescribed British pattern. If we couldn't do the job ourselves, they would do it for us. "Fine," I said, "it will be finished at about the time the Germans arrive."

The girls were restless. We were suffocating. We ate and breathed sand. Alex and the sea were only ten miles away. Couldn't they all have twenty-four hours' leave? The nurses needed new uniforms. There were dressmakers in Alex. Why not? I consulted Vernier. He agreed to my sending them into Alex in pairs, each pair for twenty-four hours. They found rooms at the Westminster Hotel, had breakfast in bed, hot baths, shampoos, manicures, and ordered their new uniforms. Then I had an idea and sent for Michael. We didn't know where we were going, perhaps we would never come back this way again. Wouldn't it be wise to collect the beds and equipment that were stored in Alex? He agreed that it would be, and so while the convoys



poured out of Alex, we went in and had our hair done and collected our beds and bedding from store.

We saw the British fleet steam out of the harbor, and Admiral Godefroy's French fleet lying safe and snug at anchor. Their safety had been enforced it is true, but they would be free to dare the open seas if and when General Rommel came. We ran into friends at the Cecil, boys who had come down from the Alamein line for a few hours' leave. John Clark, Michael Broderick, Edward Imber-Terry, Hal Astley-Corbett; they were tired and nervy and their faces showed strain; some we never saw again. And we ran into French officers from Godefroy's fleet at Pastrudis. I lunched most days at Pastrudis and there were always a dozen or more eating the rich food of that famous restaurant and drinking champagne. Their tables were gay. They seemed to be celebrating, in anticipation, Rommel's arrival.

It appeared imminent. The road into Alex and the desert round Ikingi grew more and more congested. I watched the convoys with increasing dismay. At last Reilinger turned up. The division was making across the desert to Cairo. We were to pack up and move on to Mena. It looked as if Alex might be cut off.

I said very well, but we must get permission from VIIIth Army before we moved. The hygiene squad were putting the finishing touches, I noticed, to our latrine as I got into my car. It would be ready for use they said the next day.

I went to area H.Q. and reported Reilinger's instructions. Would they please telephone Cairo and ask if we might move up to Mena? They would. I would get a message as soon as the answer came through. I thanked them. At the door I said: "By the way, that latrine will be finished tomorrow. Some day I shall write an article and its title will be 'The VIIIth Army and Latrines!'" I carried the look on their shocked faces away with me.

The orders from Cairo came through before I got back to Ikingi and I found the camp in confusion. We were to proceed under our own steam and without delay to Mena camp. Vernier had gone to the division, Jibery had received the message. As he hadn't known of my visit to area, he took the order as a sudden S.O.S. from Cairo and the result was that one or two of the French staff had panicked. They came running. We must be off at once, they said, that very night. One of the doctors had ordered the boys to make a bonfire of the kitchen tent and was throwing our cooking utensils on the fire. Michael Rowntree was watching with mild inscrutable calm. Hamilton Mills was almost in tears.

"Nonsense," I said. "There's no hurry." I fished a saucepan out of the embers. "The message is in answer to mine. We can't leave tonight anyhow.

The colonel isn't here. Two of the nurses are in Alex. They'll have to be fetched in the morning."

A wail went up at that. "Oh! Our new uniforms. Oh! they aren't finished. We must have our uniforms."

It was quite a business fetching those nurses and their uniforms. T. W. went in early next morning. She left at seven and by midday hadn't got back. The convoy was all drawn up and ready, still T. W. didn't come. The traffic was terrible. There was a block probably. Even the colonel was getting the fidgets. If they hoped to reach Mena that night they must start. So I said I would wait, and they moved off about one. Daphne was driving me that day. We sat in the dingy porch watching the bright yellow billowing dust. T. W. turned up about three, complete with nurses and bundles of half-finished uniforms. We edged our way into the massed traffic on the road and crawled with it toward Cairo. It was two in the morning when we turned into Mena camp. I had lost T. W. near Half-Way House but had collected Rosie. She had driven into a shell hole. The other three staff cars came dribbling in. Jocelyn first, then Barbara, then T. W. By two in the morning I had all the girls with me. Where Vernier was and the rest of the convoy I had no idea.

The commandant of the French camp gave us food and the hospitality of his offices for the rest of the night. The camp he said was being evacuated next morning. We shoved the office furniture out of the way and slept on the floor. At seven as we were pushing off for Cairo, Vernier came along. The convoy he said was just down the road. I told him I would take the girls to Shephard's Hotel and get them breakfast.

Shephard's was deserted. Not a soul to be seen but a porter and a clerk at the reception desk. I asked for two bedrooms with baths, and sixteen breakfasts, and there as I turned round was De Larminat coming down the wide stairs. His impassive face showed no surprise, perhaps a faint, very faint gleam of approval in the enigmatic eyes.

"Bon jour, madame."

"Bon jour, Général."

"Your formation is with you?"

"It is."

"You have all your material?"

"We have."

"Then please get in touch before noon with the British medical authorities at G.H.Q. I want your hospital in the Cairo area. Be good enough to tell them this from me and ask for a locality."

I had a bath, breakfast and went to G.H.Q.

It was Saturday I think, the fourth of July—and one of those days. G.H.Q. said I didn't belong to them and handed me on to B.T.E. I found a brigadier who said I now belonged to Reese Force.

"What's that?" I said.

"It's a new force," he said, "being organized by General Reese for the defense of Cairo."

"Oh," I said.

"Have you got your people with you?"

"I have."

"Where's your equipment?"

"Waiting in our trucks near Mena."

"You mean to say you've arrived with your complete equipment?"

"That's it."

He lifted a telephone, and asked for Q. A long sandy-haired colonel came in from Q.

"This is Lady Spears," the brigadier said. "She has turned up with her field hospital, personnel and equipment complete. About the only one isn't she who hasn't lost anything on the road?"

The colonel nodded and asked how many beds we had.

I said a hundred. I started to explain that we had collected our beds from Alex, then realized that I was babbling.

"How long will it take you to put up your hospital?"

"Two or three hours."

"How soon can you begin?"

"This afternoon."

They stared. There was a moment's silence. I didn't understand why they were so surprised by all this. Then the brigadier gave me in my turn a surprise.

"I'll send an officer with you to find a camping ground on the Suez road. But I want you to have a forward unit ready to function on the Gezira racecourse. That's in case we have to defend the bridge."

"I think I concealed my surprise. I don't think it occurred to the brigadier or the colonel before or after the interview that I knew nothing of what had been going on in Cairo when I walked into B.T.E. I knew quite a lot by the time I had tramped the blistering sand along the Suez road, been allotted a site at Kilo 4 and established contact with the colonel and the boys; but I was too tired to take much interest, so tired that the following days are one long hot blur, with a camp at the end of them that was an inferno.

We never of course sent our forward unit up to the racecourse on Gezira Island, since Rommel for reasons that are still being explained didn't advance beyond El Alamein. We sat quietly on a red-hot plate and sizzled at Kilo

4 on the Suez road through the rest of July, when General Catroux took pity on us and moved us into a beautiful school at Heliopolis. And there I had to leave them again for a time.

But before I went back to Beirut something very nice happened. It happened that first Sunday after Ash Wednesday—when I was still dazed by the heat and dust and noise of the convoys that had poured through Ikingi camp.

I found myself on a terrace that Sunday evening, stretched out on a wicker chaise longue with pale-blue cushions. There was a moon over my head and a glass of ice-cold lemonade at my elbow and my host was on one side of me and the British Ambassador on the other side. But the person who counted most was opposite across the terrace. She was a little slender creature with curly gray hair and a sweet determined mouth. I could see the moonlight glinting on the tip of her delicious nose. She was my hostess, Maie Casey, wife of the Minister of State in the Middle East and I had a feeling that we were going to be friends as long as we lived.

## CHAPTER XX

### I

LANGUID water swooning in the embrace of two long arms of rock. Bathing huts faded to robin's-egg blue, gay striped umbrellas, date palms, a dusty hill behind, crowned by a tall house, strawberry pink with many windows, dilapidated, oriental, Venetian, standing against the pale sky—and in the far distance the lovely faint silhouette of the mountains of Lebanon.

The rocks reached out from either side of the bathing huts into a sea of Prussian blue and every few minutes as if tickled by the brown fingers the sea would laugh and throw crystal showers high into the dazzling air and slim bodies would leap and fall in great sweeping arcs into the pond from a platform on iron stilts. Boats like white flat fish darted about and children shrilled through the damp heat and a voice howled an Arab lament across the water from a wireless somewhere behind me.

The sea was incredible, the rocks were incredible, the ladies swinging their plump behinds along the cement promenades that had been laid down on top of the burning rocks were incredible; one could believe in none of it.

As a backdrop for a musical comedy in the naughty nineties, the pool full of bobbing heads, the multicolored mermaids strewn on the rocks and the crazy restaurant with its shabby tables and chairs perched above the cement walk might do. But as a first line of defense for Egypt and the Suez Canal, no; yet that was why the IXth British Army and the Spears Mission and the officers of H. M. Royal Navy were here sharing this gaudy Turkish bath with the French.

The *Bain Militaire*, a relic certainly of a bygone time. The French Army of the Levant had made it long ago in the days of Weygand or Gouraud or De Martel, for the amusement of the officers of the garrison and their women and children, and now the other French had invited the British Army and Navy to share it with them, since we were allies and all in the war together. Every one of the males who walked by in loincloths or shorts had something to do with the war, and the French women who came tripping along on tiny high heels with their full bosoms and wobbling buttocks tied up

in gay-colored handkerchiefs, all perforce had something to do with the military, else they would not have been allowed in.

It was August and the bathing season in Beirut was at its height when Rosie and I arrived from Egypt. We had come by car (Rosie very proud to have done the five-hundred-mile drive from Heliopolis in one day) and had found B. dining on the cool terrace at Aley above the deep shadowed valley. Joan Ali Khan was there, I remember her golden head candlelit against the immense canopy of the stars, and Freya Stark had turned up from Baghdad and I think John Hamilton and Dan Lascelles of our Legation. We had talked of the war in the desert and the threat to Syria from the Germans who were battering at the walls of Stalingrad and pushing down through the Caucasus, and Freya gave me news of Barbara, whom she had left in Baghdad, and spoke of the new spirit of union among the Arabs of the Middle East. Then John Hamilton had surprised us, for he is a gentle creature, with an outburst against the depravity of the French colony of Beirut who had some of them never set foot in France, and Dan as I remember said nothing at all though he had more interesting stuff packed in his nervous mind than any of us (it took me the best part of two years to persuade Dan Lascelles to talk to me), and then when they had gone and Rosie had slipped off to bed B. and I sat for a while on the terrace.

General Catroux had returned, he told me, from Egypt; General de Gaulle was expected. We must go to Damascus soon for three or four days; President Dodge wanted to see me about the clinics, Mrs. Dodge wanted to see me about the nurses' club and the working party; Madame Catroux wanted me to join her in a charity ball. She had been on the phone several times. She was at Shkief, their new house in the hills. I'd better ring up.

Friendly? Oh very. Why not? He and Catroux were handling this thing together.

We had always been night owls, B. and I. Most of our talking had to be done late at night; there seemed to be no time in the day. But I was tired after my journey, my mind was all in confusion. As I dropped off to sleep in my cool pleasant mountain bedroom I seemed to be crossing the desert again. Tobruk and Bir Hakim and Solum, Helfaya Pass and Buq Buq and Dabaa fled past in my dream. Then I found myself perched on a rock above the *Bain Militaire*, waiting for B. to come from his office.

This wasn't a dream, it was merely the hot-weather routine of H.M.'s Minister to Syria and the Lebanon. He would leave Aley for his Beirut office each morning, I would follow at noon with a servant and lunch baskets and we would meet in our cabin at the *Bain*. The French officer in charge had very kindly had it built for us. It was mostly of straw with a thatched roof

and one side open to the sea, and it stood on a rock dominating the lagoon. There were deck chairs and cretonne cushions to lie on, the lunch was laid on a white cloth—cold chicken and salad, a bowl of peaches and pears, and Joseph, as soon as B. came, would cook scrambled eggs on a primus outside. It was all very pleasant and very strange after the desert.

The glare from the water stabbed through my sunglasses; the voice of the lamenting Arab howled in my ears; Rosie had gone to change into her bathing suit. How long was it since we had got lost in a sandstorm looking for Railhead? Ages ago. We had started out that day from Safafi, and missed the telegraph poles, and when we reached the place where we were supposed to find the dummy tanks they were gone.

I was seeing Bayard and Mary Dodge at five. Mary would give me tea in her pleasant American house with its old spindly mahogany. We would settle the days for our committees. A committee for the clinics with Bayard, another for the Red Cross with Mary; and I must see the matron of the New Zealand hospital and go to the 23rd General at Sidon and get together with Madame Catroux about the ball. It would have to be, she said, at the Grand Hotel at Sofar as all the rich Egyptians stayed there. Linda Sursock would help and Donna Maria and Madame Georges Tabet. All the smart Lebanese. We would have to sell hundreds of tickets and Madame Catroux would have President Naccache on her right at the gala dinner and I with luck would have General Catroux on mine, that is if he consented to come. B. certainly wouldn't—and—well—one must face it, being the wife of the British Minister in the Lebanon was a very different job from running a field hospital.

That was Commandant Joulin out there floating on his back, the nicest of General Catroux's A.D.C.'s, and here came Joan and Ali Khan, very jaunty he was, carrying their lunch basket between them, and the man across on the opposite rocks looked like Robin Hutchins, the head of the military section of the Spears Mission. A very fine-looking chap, Robin, such good legs. Hamish MacKenzie would be turning up later. What a nice staff we had at the Legation with Dan, Tony and Hamish. Hamish said Dan frightened him out of his wits, but Dan wasn't really terrifying, it was only that he had such a special liking for excellence. A fastidious mind and great integrity didn't make perhaps an easy diplomat, things would never I imagined be easy for Dan Lascelles. He couldn't drift out of trouble into the dim distance like our beautiful languid Tony, who loved birds and the English poets of the nineteenth century, nor find solace in the company of the hospitable Lebanese ladies like Hamish. Here was one of our troubles now, Boegner, the skinny man with the dark fanatic face who had joined De

Gaulle only when the battle for Beirut was won; and with him were the two toasts of the French Officers' Club; tall dusky beauties with splendid shoulders and beautiful legs, their handkerchiefs so scanty as to be almost unnoticeable.

The battle for Beirut! Had there been one? Madame X waved to me as she passed. Her husband had come out of Bir Hakim not long ago. He was in camp now, near Cairo. But the pretty little thing just going by had a husband it seemed in Madagascar who had not cared to join General de Gaulle. There were several wives in Beirut it appeared with husbands on the Vichy side. But General Catroux was kind, he was paying their marriage allowances so that they could stay on in their villas behind the languid palms. Others again, so I'd been told, had been left behind when their men sailed back to France in the good ship "Providence," and these too were being looked after at the Hotel St. Georges by the French Army.

But that wasn't fair. There was no French Army here in this country. The French Army of Syria had gone back to France and those who had not gone to France had gone to the desert. They were waiting to fight again at El Alamein. Here there was only General Catroux and his staff and a dozen delegates in a dozen residences in places like Latakia and Aleppo and Homs and Suedia in the Jebel Druse. Our old friend Magrin Verneret was at Latakia. He had put us up for the night and taken us to see the crusaders' castle of Sahum. An erratic man, he had the fascination of a dangerous soft-footed half-tamed creature who might go suddenly for your throat. And Colonel d'Essesars, a sweet man, was at Homs. And Cornillon Molinier was about somewhere with the air force. He kept popping in and out. B. liked him awfully, and he liked Rosie, was one of her many admirers. But of French troops there were none, only the *troupes spéciales* with French officers of a type very different from the men who were serving with De Larminat and Koenig in the 1st Free French Division.

There were, apparently, a great many Vichy French about; some in high positions. The post, telegraph, harbor and so on. The Free French had had, it seemed, nothing like enough men to staff the administration when they took over and General Catroux, rather than let IXth Army help, had preferred to keep on the French civil servants who had run the show under Dentz. What would happen if the war ever came this way, if the Germans came down through Turkey? Our security people weren't happy, but we couldn't kick the Vichy men out; only Catroux could do that, or De Gaulle. The IXth Army were in control of the country for war purposes but the French had territorial privileges. It seemed to be very complicated. Where did the Lebanese and Syrian governments come in? Perhaps they didn't. They had



been given their independence but didn't appear to have much say in what was going on. It must be odd to have no control over your own army and police.

The French officers in command of the local troops were not very interested in the war apparently. Why should they be? They were very comfortable as they were. They had been comfortable in their Syrian garrisons when the enemy broke through at Sedan and rushed down on Paris. They had been equally comfortable when the Germans descended in their transport planes on their Syrian airdromes; and when we arrived they had come quite comfortably over to our side and were staying on undisturbed under the sign of the *Croix de Lorraine*.

But since they were here what were they doing? The British IXth Army was here to defend Egypt. What were the French defending? The interests of France presumably. France had had a mandate. But General Catroux had put an end to the mandate. He had said so on the eighth of June, over a year ago, on the day we moved up to Irbid—and General Catroux was an honorable man. He had refused to hand over French Indo-China to the Japs, and had joined General de Gaulle, who had joined us, so we were allies. We mustn't forget that. We were all in the war together, that is to say for the same reason. But if we were here because of the war and the French were here simply because they had been here for the last twenty-five years and meant to stay war or no war, and the local governments expected us all to hand the country back to them when the war was over, the situation seemed to hold possibilities of confusion and misunderstanding.

## II

I don't know just when it was that B. began to doubt the good faith of the Free French in their dealings with the Syrian and Lebanese governments. He has never told me. It is possible that he doesn't know himself. But nothing happened during that summer of '42 to make his dealings with General Catroux too difficult or interfere with our friendly intercourse. Madame Catroux and I held our charity ball together at Sofar and made a large sum of money. All the bigwigs of the country turned up, the President of the republic, Monsieur Naccache and his wife, the Foreign Minister, the Minister of the Interior, all the Ministers in fact of the government that didn't govern (the constitution had been suspended at the outbreak of war) and all the French officials who were in fact carrying on the business of government for them, and all the smart set of Beirut, whom I was beginning to know, the Sursocks and the Tabets and the Tuenis and the Trads and the Pharacons

and the Bustros, and Emile Eddé, who meant to be the next President of the republic when General Catroux decided to allow the people to hold elections in the country, and nice good-natured Bechara Khoury who also wanted to be the next President but wasn't as sure of himself as Emile Eddé, since he wasn't popular with the Catroux—and quite a number of officers from IXth Army and the American consul general and the Egyptian, Turkish, Greek and Persian consuls—everyone in fact who mattered with the exception of H.M.'s Minister Sir Edward Spears and General Catroux, *Délégué Général et Commandant en Chef des Armées du Levant*.

And then General de Gaulle arrived and moved like royalty into the *Résidence des Pins*, (the damage done by the R.A.F. had been repaired) and all the world, including H.M.'s Minister and Lady Spears, was summoned to his presence.

We didn't know we had received a summons, nor that we were about to be given a special audience. It was all done by telephone between A.D.C.'s. There was an official reception on a certain day at the French Residency, Francis Stonor our new A.D.C. told us, at four-thirty. All the consular corps was invited. But we were bidden to come at ten minutes past four. We were not to be bundled in with the crowd of consuls but were to receive special treatment. I thought it rather odd, so did B. It was not, after all, our first meeting with General de Gaulle. Such formality seemed a little excessive. Still, we decided to go. Not at ten past four precisely, that was impossible. But I put on my smartest dress and a large hat and we drove through the great gates of the residency and past the guard of honor at four-twenty.

Half a dozen servants and a couple of officers were on the wide front steps to meet us. I jumped out, and as I knew the residency well, made for the large salon on the right of the entrance hall, which I saw was already filled with people. But one of the A.D.C.'s said, "*Pardon, madame,*" and whisked me round to a door on the left and I found myself in a room that was almost dark, as all the blinds were down; and it was quite empty. B. and Francis had followed and there we waited in a dim twilight, wondering what it was all about, until a minute or two later a door at the end of the room was flung open and General de Gaulle stalked in, followed by General Catroux. They bowed in turn over my hand. They greeted B., then Francis; General de Gaulle sat down beside me on a settee and asked after my health. I replied and asked after his. Then a servant came in with a large tray holding some fifty glasses of orangeade, and General de Gaulle signed to me to take one and I did, and I asked about the health of Madame de Gaulle and then a moment later General Catroux got to his feet and said to De Gaulle, "My

General, your guests await you," so General de Gaulle got up and B. got up and I got up, thinking, "Now for the party," and I made again for the large salon, but again the A.D.C. said, "*Pardon, madame*," and got between me and the doors of the salon and steered me out on to the front steps, and our car with its two nice Union Jacks flying drew up and we got into it and drove off and that was that.

I said to B., "We've had an audience," and he said "Yes, so it would seem," and we laughed. But when Francis explained that it was meant as a special courtesy because of our exalted rank I said I needn't have got myself all dolled up if I wasn't to be allowed to go to the party; and I remembered a day two years before when General de Gaulle had shared our family Xmas dinner in a cottage in England and reflected on how things had changed.

He stayed in Beirut about a week as I remember, and we saw him again. He asked us to lunch this time and I sat on his right and, firmly determined not to be repelled or intimidated by his heavy, cold, hooded eyes, I told him about the day at Sulum after the sortie from Bir Hakim when Koenig came to the hospital to visit the wounded. I described the scene, very much as I have described it in this book, and he listened with an impassive face, but with close attention, and then he said, "*Je vous remercie de m'avoir raconté cela*," but he did not say, "Thank you for what you and your nurses did for my men." Neither then nor at any time during the war did he say anything that could be construed as a tribute to the work we had done.

I mention this not because it affected my attitude to his troops—to them I was bound, to them I belonged, not to him, for him I had never felt anything warmer than a cold, fascinated admiration—but because the incident confirmed my early analysis of his character. There was no room in General de Gaulle's intense concentrated being for such a weak emotion as gratitude. He was no longer an unknown exile suffering an agony of humiliation. He was not a refugee in Beirut come to beg favors from a powerful friend. He was, in his own opinion at least, on French territory, and was conducting himself as a monarch. But he still found it impossible to acknowledge a debt to any foreigner, even to an individual Englishwoman who shared the life of his troops. One might have expected from him in his changed circumstances a generous gesture. A more normal man would have unbent. Not De Gaulle. He had come a long way. He was the recognized head of a movement that was gathering strength every day, but he had still a very long way to go, and he couldn't relax. He wouldn't relax until he had reached, if ever he did reach, his final goal; not only the liberation but the

restoration of France. Even that wouldn't be the end, not to restore France to her former grandeur; that wasn't enough to satisfy him; France must be reborn and rebuilt on foundations quite other than those that had crumbled in 1939.

If one believes, as I do, that he was obsessed by these visions at the time I speak of, and was concentrating on the method of transforming them from dreams into powerful fact, then his icy arrogance, his fantastic assumption of sovereign power when he possessed no such thing and his persistent will to repel and refuse all friendly gestures becomes comprehensible. He was bluffing on a colossal scale. He was playing a gigantic game, with almost no cards in his hand. He was out first to conquer France for the French and then to force the world to recognize as a first-class power a France that had forfeited the world's respect.

We didn't, as I recall, see any more of him on that visit. What the substance was of his conferences with General Catroux I have no idea. If he recognized in his former comrade and colleague, General Spears, a future antagonist, it would not surprise me. Events were going to suggest plainly that he had no intention then or at any time of allowing the States of the Levant to achieve a real independence. If that was true, then the British government's guarantee of his own proclamation must have been very irksome and the presence of his friend Spears in Beirut very galling. For he knew Spears. He was well aware that with him no bargaining and no compromise would be possible. Put bluntly, De Gaulle I believe meant to go back on his promise, he had no intention of allowing Syria and the Lebanon to slip through his fingers; if it weren't for the British it would be easy he knew to get out of the promise he'd given. But the British were tiresome and obstinate when they thought their good name was involved, and Spears was more obstinate than most. He would have to get at the British government somehow. Political blackmail, threat to impede our war effort? Yes, there were means of doing it. But to get at the British Minister on the spot was impossible. He didn't attempt it.

If I seem to be drawing a very long bow, I can only say that what happened later bears out what I believe to have been in De Gaulle's mind at the time. That he was in a very bellicose mood was proved by a speech he made at the *Cercle de l'Union* in Beirut a day or two after we lunched with him. His audience that evening was French; no outsiders were admitted, but I listened in on the wireless from Aley and heard him say:

*"Cela m'est égal qui gagne la guerre pourvu que la France la gagne."* ("It is a matter of indifference to me who wins the war as long as France wins it.")

## III

It became evident at the end of the summer ('42) that unless I gave up all connection with the unit I must take to the air and manage to lead two lives separated by several thousand miles. For I was involved in two distinct spheres of activity with two centers of gravity and the center of gravity of the hospital was going to move farther and farther away from my fixed base, the British Legation in Beirut.

One might argue that my first duty was to my husband; that no one else could take the place of the British Minister's wife in the Levant, while the hospital could get on quite well without me; but B. didn't share that view. Neither in '42 nor at any time did he ask me to give up the unit or object to my leaving him to rejoin it. On the contrary, he made it easy. I had duties in Syria and the Lebanon and he expected me to discharge them, but he knew that I had put my heart into the making of this field hospital and he took it seriously as a creditable war effort. He was in fact proud of the unit and of the British women, of whom I was one, who followed the Free French in the field. He had moreover a special interest in the Free French Division, since he had been responsible with General de Gaulle for its formation; and he never lost that interest. So he left me free to divide my time, indeed demanded that I should do so with one thought always present in his mind, that winning the war was what mattered most and that the smallest individual effort toward that end was important.

One other consideration weighed with me continually; my responsibility to the British War Relief Committee in New York. They had made me a very handsome offer and were carrying it out with great generosity. Not only had they given the bulk of the money for the initial expense of equipment, they were sending a monthly contribution that covered our running expenses. Not the running expenses of the hospital, those had been taken over by the military, but such things as nurses' salaries, uniforms, tropical kit, renewal of hospital equipment and our office expenses in London. Dorea Stanhope as honorary secretary of the unit was in charge at the London end and was in constant touch with Leslie Benson, and Leslie had made it clear that the money from America was given on the understanding that I remained head of the unit.

I was therefore not free to give it up had I wanted to do so. I didn't. I had no such intention. However difficult and whatever the distance I must lead my two lives.

I made a brief visit to the unit in August. I was with them again in October. General de Larminat and his A.D.C. Captain Lorelle were seriously

injured in August in a motor smash and had been admitted to the hospital as patients. It was still in its excellent quarters in Heliopolis and I knew that they would be well cared for but there had been a number of changes in our team and I wanted to make sure that all was well. Four new M.T.C. girls had arrived in July with Jean Williams to replace Annabel Mann, who had gone home, Cynthia, who had gone to the U.S.A. to see her mother and make up her mind whether or not she wanted to marry Peter Smith-Dorrien, Joy Goode, who had been married to Mervyn Phipps, and Daphne Burnside, who was leaving. We had needed our new recruits badly, and I had asked this time for drivers who were trained V.A.D.'s and would be prepared to go into the wards in times of stress. They had been a long time on the way as their ship had been held up in the Red Sea because of the threat to Egypt during the retreat to El Alamein, but had turned up at last in Cairo in time to join us at Heliopolis, and they had seemed very nice. Biddy Pattison was large and appeared intelligent and competent. Rachel Howell-Evans the first time she drove me had looked at me out of wonderfully beautiful scared gray eyes and had said in a husky voice that was peculiarly charming, "I hear you like to be driven very fast, Lady Spears." She has told me since that she was very afraid of me and thought she ought to call me Mam. But I had had little chance to get to know either; while Iris Goodwin and Ruth Nicolls I felt I didn't know at all. Iris isn't the kind to put her goods in the shop window. It took me months to recognize the strength inside that shy slip of a girl.

I hadn't much liked Captain Lorelle when I first met him in Beirut. He had seemed to me a cynical, rather dissipated young man with an exaggerated interest in the ladies who frequented the bar of the Hotel St. Georges, but I revised my opinion when he came to us with a broken back. It was a nasty smash. The car had gone over a culvert on the Cairo-Alex road and Lorelle had been thrown clear. He told me that when he came to, he saw De Larminat caught under the car and managed to crawl over to him. He didn't know his back was broken and thought the general was dead. He tried to shift the car but couldn't. All he could do was yell for help. There was a stream of military traffic going past above them and at last someone heard him and they were put into an Indian ambulance. He thought he must have fainted because he remembered nothing about being picked up and suddenly found De Larminat and himself being driven off in an ambulance with Indian drivers and orderlies. De Larminat was quite unconscious but he, Lorelle, had just enough sense, he told me, to know that they would be taken to an Indian hospital near by so he shouted, "Spears. Hadfield-Spears Hospital, Heliopolis." And though the pain was pretty bad, he managed to

keep conscious and to go on shouting, "Spears, take us to Spears," until they did finally drive all the way out to the unit.

He and De Larminat had been installed in a suite of two bedrooms and bath, looking down from a height into the courtyard, Evelyn Fuhlroth became their special nurse and Lorelle soon began to run the hospital from the high balcony. He would get the boys to carry him out on his stretcher, and lying there on his stomach he would shout hilarious orders and insults to the boys, the nurses, the Spirettes and the doctors who passed down below. And he ragged Evelyn unmercifully. His great amusement was to make her blush. "Look, Lady Spears, look how she's blushing, the poor girl, and I only asked her what kind of panties she wears." Madame de Larminat would turn up each morning with bottles of champagne and a giant thermos filled with ice cream from Gruppis, and Lorelle would be wheeled into De Larminat's room and we would all gather round the general's bed, and Madame de Larminat would laugh at her husband's face that changed under its head bandages as the days passed from deep purple to a strange shading of mauve, yellow and green. His injuries were very painful but luckily not very grave. He left us as I remember after a fortnight, Lorelle appeared in Beirut at the end of September very gay in a plaster strait jacket that held him in a vice from chin to hips. He had made all the nurses and Spirettes write their names on it and, opening his waistcoat to show me, he asked me to add my signature. I did so on his chest. I didn't see him again. He was flown in his plaster to the States to see his American wife and returned in time to be killed leading an assault in the last battle for Tunis. De Larminat told me in his terse way that he had asked leave to take part in the battle, and had fallen at the head of his men. "*Une mort respectable.*"

I returned to Aley in September to move the household down to Beirut, but it was understood in my family that I was to rejoin the unit for the battle that was preparing at El Alamein, and a message reached me on October 20 from Colonel Vernier suggesting that it would be desirable for me to come, so I packed my kit bag again, rolled up my blankets, got into uniform and took the plane on the twenty-second for Cairo.

T. W. met me at El Maza. The unit was at Buselli, she said, in the Delta, about fifteen miles this side of Alex—much too far back in her opinion. We'd better go straight down, if I didn't mind. I was only just in time. Did I want to stop in Cairo for anything? No.

She settled down at the wheel and continued to talk in a series of jerky mutterings that seemed to have become a habit among the girls, but I heard the suppressed excitement underneath.

Monty was expected to open his offensive any day now. The Bays had

come up. She'd seen her baby brother—Yes, very fit, thanks—the regiment in very good form—VIIIth Army was quite different from last summer. I should have seen the convoys going up.

The colonel had left with the forward unit. Jibery was in charge at Buselli. The French were at the extreme south end of the line on the edge of the Kantara depression. Yes, we had very good quarters. A section of a big military hospital, first-class army huts. The Australians were next door.

The girls? Not too bad. They'd had a beastly time hanging about at Mena after they left Heliopolis, but they'd be all right now. We had two hundred beds ready and Jean had asked for help, so Biddy and Rachel and Iris had gone into the wards. Was Barbara coming back? Yes, she should arrive in a few days.

I had timed my arrival, it seemed, very well. The battle of El Alamein began the next day, October 23, 1942, and the ambulances began to roll in at the hospital gate the same evening. That was all we saw of Monty's great attack and VIIIth Army's magnificent revenge on Rommel. But the suspense of the first days, the growing excitement, the great surging leap forward came back to us as if carried by the wind.

It was said later that the French didn't do well at El Alamein. I only know that they had a very tough time and suffered heavily, especially in officers. Our officers' ward was soon filled with old friends—De Robert, De Boulardièrre, Lalande, Morel, many others. Every bed in the hospital was full by the time Barbara arrived, and with three of the M.T.C. helping the nurses she was badly needed. Biddy, Rachel and Iris were proving themselves invaluable. Jean had allotted one to each of the big surgical wards; even so the nurses had their hands full.

Evelyn had one of the heaviest wards. It was a large double hut, officers in one half, other ranks in the other. I remember the excitement among the officers when the news came through that the Americans and British had landed in North Africa, then that the French forces in Algiers after a three-day resistance had capitulated. This was almost more than they could stomach. That the French had fought the Allies again—! They couldn't understand it. "*Les salauds*," they muttered, ears strained to hear the voice of the radio. "*Les crétins*. They are the very same who fought us in Syria. What do you think of that, Lady Spears?" And a great discussion would begin about Weygand, Noguès, Admiral Esteva, Juin, and what General de Gaulle would do when he'd got Tunis and Bizerta in his hands.

The officers had many visitors. The ladies of the French Red Cross in Alexandria were more than kind. They brought fruit, sweets, cakes, cigarettes and papers. Madame Catroux came one day with great baskets of oranges



and did a tour of all the wards. She had installed a convalescent home in Alex and seemed happier than she had been in Beirut. There were days when the hospital was quite gay with half a dozen smart limousines outside the office, but some of the wards were grim, and beyond the partition that cut off the officers from the rest of Evelyn's hut the old silent struggle that we knew so well was going on day and night.

I went late one night and found Evelyn still on duty though she should have gone off long before. She was by a bed in the far shadowed corner giving a saline and I went over to her and saw that the man's hands and eyes were bandaged. I waited. When she had installed her saline, she turned and came down the ward with me between the rows of sleeping forms. Some were moaning a little, some were delirious, some seemed scarcely to breathe.

Evelyn was one of our very best nurses. She had a fiery nature and was happiest when she had a great deal to do but her blue eyes were very distressed that night.

"I hope he'll die," she said. "I think he will, he's very bad, I can't find his pulse, he'd much better die, he is blind and has lost both hands."

But he didn't die. He was one of the youngsters who had joined up at Camberley. Barbara knew him at once when she went into the ward. "Don't you remember," she said, "he used to come to the canteen to drink milk and eat many cakes?" Perhaps if Evelyn hadn't been such an excellent nurse, he might have died. How can one say that it would have been better so? I saw him some months later in the French hospital in Damascus. Madame Butherne had left us and was looking after him there. He insisted that he could see a little. But it wasn't true. He had no eyes. I saw the empty sockets. I don't know what has become of him.

We were accustomed to death, but at Baselli it came suddenly into our private midst. It came over the telephone. There was a telephone in my hut and it rang late one night while I was getting ready for bed.

A man's voice, English, asked for Kit Tatham-Warter.

"She isn't here," I said. "Who wants her?"

A friend, he said, of her brother's. An officer in the Queen's Bays. Where could he find her?

"I'm sorry; she's in Alex tonight. She won't be back until tomorrow."

"Oh—" a pause, then, "I have news for her."

The voice sounded so troubled that I asked quickly, "Is it bad news?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. I shouldn't be telephoning."

"I'm Lady Spears. You can tell me. I'm in charge here." I waited; there was a silence. "Are you there?"

"Yes."

"Has Kit's brother been wounded?"

"Yes."

"Killed?"

"Yes; he was killed this morning."

T. W.'s baby brother. He wasn't a baby. He was married, but she always spoke of him like that. Biddy Pattison went into Alex to tell her and brought her back next morning. Looking out of my window before lunch I saw her at work on her car. She was in overalls and covered with grease. She didn't look up as I passed. She spent all that day and the next greasing and tinkering with the cars. I never saw her cry. She went off to find the regiment and came back again. I didn't ask for details. She didn't talk to me; nor I believe to anyone, unless to Biddy, just stuck to her job and carried on. She had entered for the war and was not to be defeated. No one would have known during those days that anything had happened to her. There was no sign, save her silence.

Colonel Vernier all this time had been far ahead of us in the desert with the forward unit. I went up to see him after the battle, traveling up the road down which we had pelted the beginning of July. Rommel was in full retreat and German and Italian prisoners were pouring down the road to the hastily constructed prison camps. Vast throngs of them were sitting on the ground in the barbed-wire enclosures as if attending some great religious ceremony—but they were waiting, Rachel said, for their dinner. We turned off to the south on a track marked by a white signboard with "Bombay" in large black letters. All the desert was mapped out by these signboards. A remarkable sight. The mine fields were named after great rivers. The Tiber. The Nile. The Amazon. But the gates through the mine fields took one's mind home; Albert Gate, Stanhope Gate—and so on. We turned in as I remember at Stanhope Gate and pushed on across the Amazon.

The colonel was in great form. He gave us lunch in his dugout and described the eagerness of the prisoners who had been streaming past not to be left behind. A long line of trucks would come by driven by prisoners and filled with prisoners. One British tommy in the first truck in charge of the lot. A truck had broken down just outside his door. I should have seen the German driver. He was out in a wink and into the bonnet. He worked in a frenzy. The convoy was almost out of sight when he got the engine going and went racing after it.

They would be moving forward soon now, the colonel said. The Germans were on the run and "Spears" would be after them with the rest. I must

stay. I must go with them to Tripoli, Tunis, Paris. I must get long leave from the general. His exuberance did not seem unreasonable.

I longed to stay on. But there was Xmas to prepare for in the Levant. We had three thousand Xmas parcels to do for the British troops in hospital in Beirut, Sidon, Damascus and Aleppo. And we were giving two Xmas dances at home, one for officers, one for other ranks in the Spears Mission.

Home? Which was home?

"You'll come back soon, won't you?" they cried, as I got into the old Ford. I would come back, yes, of course—whenever I could get away I'd be with them. But I was handing over to Barbara; from now on for a year it was going to be her show.

## CHAPTER XXI

### I

THE wife of a British Minister accredited to a small nation is certain to receive much flattery and attention. This was especially true in the Levant. For the patriots of Syria and the Lebanon counted from the beginning on our government to stand by them in their struggle for independence, and they made the fact very evident. It had not been General Catroux's proclamation that had filled them with new hope and confidence but the British guarantee of that proclamation. They did not count on the French, I believe, for two reasons, first because they had already been given the same promise three times, second because they were far from being convinced of General de Gaulle's title to speak for France. His authority was vague and depended on his British ally. As a French officer he was merely the leader of a band of rebels who had been outlawed by Pétain; and Pétain was not a vague figure to the peoples of the Levant. His writ had run until very recently in Beirut and Damascus. It had been broadcast to every village in the Lebanon and every tribe in the Syrian desert until his troops were defeated and shipped back to France by the incomprehensible British.

The Levantines are not stupid people. The bankers of Beirut and the Arab chiefs in their Syrian tents knew that it was the British who had brought the war into their country and they knew why. The Axis representatives had been active; the arrival of German planes had been no secret. The British were a great power, as great perhaps as the Germans, not so the French who had been defeated by the Germans in France and by the British in the Levant. The Syrians did not welcome the arrival of a new lot of Frenchmen who had come with the consent and support of the British Army to assume the old privileged position of France in their country. Too many were still living who remembered the rebellion of 1925 in the Jebel Druse and the bloodshed that followed in Damascus when the French had shelled the city. Twenty-five thousand Arabs had been killed in that uprising.

Feeling in the Lebanon was less strong. Half the population was Christian, the other half Moslem and Druse, and the French had proclaimed

themselves to be the protectors of the Christians. Very strange protectors, some said, who incited the Moslems against those they professed to protect; others, especially the very rich, were ready to welcome their old friend General Catroux. But clearly it was the British who would decide the fate of the Levant States—unless of course they were defeated by the Germans. Until the British arrived both the Syrians and the Lebanese had believed that the Germans would win the war. Now they were no longer certain. The British in the meantime were here, and the Free French had renewed the old promise of independence; but this time with a difference.

General Gouraud had declared it in 1921, Monsieur de Jouvenel had repeated the proclamation as high commissioner after the affair of 1925; a treaty recognizing their independence and purporting to end the French mandate had been signed by the French, Syrian and Lebanese governments in 1936, and this, like the other promises, had come to nothing as it had not been ratified by the Chamber of Deputies in Paris. But this time Great Britain had associated herself with the Free French in recognizing both Syria and the Lebanon as sovereign and independent states. In the words of General Catroux's manifesto of September, 1941, in Damascus, "*Le Gouvernement Britannique, allié de la France Libre, agissant en accord avec elle, s'est par une déclaration simultanée associé à cette tâche politique importante.*"<sup>1</sup> And the British government had put the official seal on the recognition by appointing a Minister to the two governments.

It was natural in the circumstances that the peoples of the Levant should look upon the British Minister as a friend and be very nice to his wife; they were.

## II

We were supposed to have an official residence in Damascus as well as in Beirut since B. was accredited to both governments. Damascus indeed was the more important place of the two, but we could find nothing suitable. The modern houses were few, the well-to-do Syrians who lived in them had no wish to let, and it was a rule in IXth Army not to requisition a building save for purely military needs. We had found one or two fine Arab houses in the old city, one in particular that instantly took my fancy but it was as instantly turned down by our own people on grounds of security. We visited it, I remember, in May, conducted by a Secretary, I think he was, of the Syrian cabinet. It had been at one time a sheik's palace and was being used now as a divorce court, but that, our guide said, presented no dif-

<sup>1</sup> "The British Government, ally of Free France acting in accord with her, has associated itself in this important political task by a simultaneous declaration."

ficulty. The Syrian government would be only too delighted to turn the court out if we would move in.

You would not have guessed from outside the old worn windowless wall that a palace lay behind. You entered from a narrow street by a great door studded with nails to find yourself in an enchanted space where shimmering light played on a myriad windowpanes and pale marble pavements faintly blue. The wide courtyard was square, the four walls of the house were fragile. There was a fountain, there were orange trees. A yellow Rambler clambered delicately over the frail windows opposite, a luxuriant wisteria drooped from the eaves on our right, foaming down the frail pearly façade. The door behind me was of ivory, carved and inlaid with ebony. I caught my breath. There was no one to be seen. Nothing moved in the enchanted place save the fountain rising and falling—rising and falling. How still it was. Not a sound from the bazaar, only the plash of water in the round basin.

But they said, No—it wasn't possible. Even if we could put in plumbing and heating. The street was too narrow. The British Minister must live in a street wide enough for tanks to patrol in case of trouble. So we were obliged to stay at the Orient Palace Hotel when we went to Damascus.

It was rather horrid staying in the hotel and it added greatly to my difficulty in getting to know the Moslem women. I wanted to know them. I took for granted that it was one of my duties as a Minister's wife to make friends among the people to whom my husband was accredited. I met some of the leading men but I wanted to know their families. I am not thinking of Tajedine who was president when we arrived; no one could have called that comic little rascal an Arab leader. He was merely a political boss out of some fantastic Franco-Arabian Tammany Hall. I am thinking of the men who had spent most of their lives in exile or in prison and were going to form the government of the country a year later. Chukri Quwatli, who was to become President, and Saadulleh Jabri and Jamil Mardam Bey and Faris Bey Khoury. Occasionally one or another would dine with us in the stiff green-plush semiprivate dining room of the Orient Palace. They interested me, I liked them. I found it easy to talk to them. Chukri Quwatli was massive and dark, his powerful frame and proud face with its arched nose was heavy. Jabri had elegance, he was slight with a smooth silver-gray head, his face was delicately modeled but he had a look of great determination. Faris Khoury was a Christian, he reminded me forcibly of my American grandfather. He had a great shock of gray hair and laughing eyes. He was old and rugged and strong. He had been one of the early graduates of the American University of Beirut and spoke fluent English with an American

accent. They all gave one an impression of strength, but in Jamil Mardam one felt elasticity, a mixture of subtlety and resilience, a quick controlled sharpness that seemed almost French. He was the most "European" of the four.

Freya Stark alludes to these men in her book *East is West* as being fine examples of a rising middle class among the Arabs of Syria. The phrase does not convey to my mind any idea of their style. They are not Arab princes but they have the stamp of what we call "race." I used to place them in imagination on the stair of some ducal mansion in London, then in the fine rare formality of a Paris drawing room and found they fitted very well into both. None would lose any part of his dignity or ease in any surroundings however magnificent or strange. Redoubtable men, they would be formidable opponents. To me they seemed very like men of a kindred people.

It wasn't until a year later, and we at last had a house of our own, that I met their womenfolk. Well-born Moslem women don't frequent hotels. In Paris perhaps or London, not in Damascus. Nor does a Moslem lady dine out with her husband in the Arab world. If she is progressive like Madame Mardam she may receive a man who is her husband's friend, provided that she is very certain indeed that he is a true friend to her people, but until she is certain, she remains aloof and veiled. It may be that the Syrian ladies were not certain as yet of us, at this time. I don't know. I made friends with only two, I became intimate with only one during our first year in Damascus and both were rebels.

Young Madame Azem was spoken of as the leader of a revolt among the Moslem ladies of Damascus against the veil and all that it signified; if she was, she led her rebellion with gaiety and discretion. She had lived for some years in Paris and I thought her French when she swept up to the door of the British consulate at the wheel of her large limousine and came rapidly up the steps in her smart country clothes, a turban bound closely round her tawny head. She had come to tell Mrs. Gardner (our consul's wife) that she would join her work party. She was breathless and vivacious. She was very attractive and I always tried to see her when I went to Damascus. Sometimes she would turn up at Aley, or in Beirut, driving herself at high speed across the mountains. She had a long-legged, quick, harum-scarum charm that was exceptional in her world, and her young husband, an impoverished member of the famous Azem family, let her do what she liked. There was no question for Hayat Azem of wearing a veil at any time, even a tiny one of finest gauze. Her father had been a Syrian member of the Turkish parliament and showed no desire to curb his daughter's somewhat inconsequent ac-

tivities. Hayat wanted to start a society of the Red Crescent. Her aunt, Madame Abed, had had a long connection with the French Red Cross and thought it would be very difficult to split off and abandon Madame Catroux.

Madame Abed was no revolutionary and aspired to no elegance. She was old and dowdy and cozy and cynical. She was the widow of a man who had been President at one time, and at others Ambassador to half a dozen countries. She had lived in London and Washington without learning two words of English and would roll her bright brown eyes when her niece talked in her rapid enthusiastic way about Arab unity and Syrian independence, and say in faulty French, "You are young. When you have seen what I have seen—"

I began to perceive shades, many and fine, in Moslem society. My other rebel was quite different from Hayat Azem, and in a much less happy position. She wasn't married and she had a very strict father for whom she had a great regard. She was not a violent rebel, nor a rebel in politics, nor yet in religion. Politics didn't interest her very much nor questions of faith; she was a Moslem but she said, laughing, that it was impossible to keep the precepts of the Koran in the modern world. How could one kneel down on a carpet and pray three times a day in silk stockings? She didn't doubt the faith of her ancestors (they were very illustrious) nor wish to break away from it. She said simply that she would never marry since she wouldn't marry a Moslem and couldn't marry anyone else without breaking her father's heart. Life in a Moslem family was dreadful, she said. She had several sisters and a brother. They lived with their parents in a fine modern house; the chairs in the drawing room were stiffly set out in a large circle and when I went to see them, we sat in a circle. The rebel daughter would complain: "But we all sit together like that all day. You can never be alone in a family like ours."

Though she is very intelligent, I realized in time that nothing interested her very much but her own cramped frustrated life and the ways and means of getting out of it without upsetting her father and getting herself talked about. She got out of it usually in her brother's car or, if he failed her, in a taxi. She would escape over the mountains to Beirut in a taxi, and once there, she would toss the gauzy veil from her delicate boyish head, appear in clothes that might have come straight from Paris, and enjoy herself. Or she would put on tweeds and stout walking shoes and come out with us for a tramp through the hills. She looked more like an American than an English girl, she was very supple and slender, with small beautiful hands and feet. She had a great deal of charm. I'm not sure that she wasn't a bit of a minx. But we grew very fond of her. She stayed with us once for a week,



and had a great success at a dance I remember at the Georges Tabets' where she wore a low ball dress of pale yellow satin, without sleeves. But she was in a panic when she found that a photographer with a flashlight had included her in his group. If her father were to see the photograph, if some nasty-minded mischief-making cat were to send it to Damascus—Poor little rebel.

"A Moslem lady cannot be forced by her husband to go out of her house," our guide had told me, when he showed us the palace of the wisteria and yellow ramblers. "It is in her marriage contract."

"I don't understand. You mean, do you not, that her husband cannot forbid her to go out?"

"No, lady, I mean that he cannot force her to go out. If a Moslem lady wishes to spend all her life at home in her own house and never go out even in a carriage, her husband cannot object."

"And do they wish to stay always at home?"

"Yes, lady, in the old days, it was most usual. That is why the old houses have courtyards and gardens. It is the desire of an Arab gentleman to provide his wife with everything that she needs inside her own walls. A garden to walk in, with shade for summer and sun for winter, rooms for hot weather in one part, the winter residence in another."

"I see. I thought the women longed to go out into the world and that their husbands kept them hidden away."

"Oh, no, lady, not in old families."

### III

I had a quite different approach to the people of the country through the Spears clinics. There were five centers. One at Chtaura in the Bekaa Valley, one at Sidnaya not far from Damascus, one at Selimieh on the edge of the Palmyra desert, one at Latakia and one in the far north at Tel Tamar on the Khabur River. The districts had been chosen by the committee, all were under the wing of the Spears Mission and all could count on the army for rations, petrol and repairs, thanks to the sympathy of General Wilson. Indeed the boys couldn't have lived otherwise in the north nor kept their vehicles roadworthy.

The clinics at Sidnaya near Damascus and Chtaura in the Bekaa were easily reached. Chtaura indeed was on the main Beirut-Damascus road, half-way between the two, and we would often stop, especially in the winter when we were delayed on our way over the mountains by snow or fog, and would lunch at Masabki's hotel. If we told him we were coming he would

have a fire roaring in the stove of his private dining room (it was tapestried in heavy Persian rugs) and a wonderful array of hors d'œuvres awaiting us, mezze they were called. Ripe olives and pistachio nuts and a special pungent cheese and a delicious savory dish of the country that we scooped up in a fold of paper-thin Arab bread. Fish would follow, then jugged hare or roast partridge and a great pie with whipped cream and all this with an excellent wine from the neighboring vineyards. Masabki was a wonderful host. He would load up the car with good things when we left. Jars of honey, baskets of apples and in the spring great bunches of fat asparagus. He was very kind to the F.A.U. boys of the clinic.

They didn't work in Chtaura, they lived there in a rough cottage and worked in the villages far down the wide beautiful valley. I would go and spend the day with them. The peasants would bring the sick from miles around, often on donkeys. I would find a donkey park at the village gate and a crowd thronging the courtyard of the headman's house. Some of the villages were very poor, there was great misery among the people. Malaria, dysentery and trachoma ravaged the country but the scene was always full of color and gaiety as well as pathos. Many of the small mud houses had charming interiors. The rooms were usually distempered in a soft blue and niches in the walls held plates of gay design. The younger women were often beautiful, and would welcome me with great courtesy. They would ask me in for coffee and if I offered cigarettes, the old grandmothers were delighted and would sit beside me puffing with deep enjoyment.

It was interesting to see their gentleness with each other. There is a legend abroad to the effect that Arabs do not love and cherish their girl children. Anyone who has entered into the life of those Syrian villages will know that this is not true. How many times have I seen a splendid horseman or an equally splendid ruffian, mounted on a diminutive donkey, bring his infant daughter to the *hakim* (doctor) and wait with stricken fearful face to know if the poor precious morsel was doomed. They were very tender with their little girls, these stalwart Moslems, gentle with a gentleness that could only be inspired by love.

I was so struck by it that I asked the Emir Mirza in Selimieh if it were true that the Moslems loved their daughters as much as their sons and he said, "Yes—and for me it is true that I love my granddaughters best, because they are most helpless."

We were on our way, Rosie and I, to Tel Tamar near the Turkish frontier, traveling in the old Ford V-8, but with a military driver from the Spears Mission as escort. I haven't space to describe the journey but it was very

fascinating and everywhere we found British officers of the O.C.P. ready to welcome us. Each, with his French opposite number, was dealing with wheat. In Hama, ancient city of water wheels on the Orontes, we found Captain Branch. In Aleppo we picked up Major Altounian, malarial expert, had a picnic lunch on the banks of the Euphrates next day, and found Colonel Ditchburn awaiting us at Deir-ez-Zor. Colonel Ditchburn was our political officer for the whole of the Jezere. He put us up very kindly in his comfortable house and took us to dine with the Brossets.

Our old friend Colonel Brosset had been appointed French delegate for the Jezere and had moved into the residency. Madame Brosset had just arrived, traveling with her four children from Brazil. We saw them after dinner in their beds on the roof. Colonel Brosset insisted on showing them to us. You couldn't find children like his every day, he said, so we climbed to the roof and there they were asleep in the moonlight, with their small noses showing above the coverlets. Brosset swelled out his fine chest as he looked down on them. And indeed he had a right to be proud, for they were lovely young tender things, and I think of them now that their father is dead and can feel again the soft strangeness of that mild, distant Eastern night with the Euphrates moving slowly, silently past the house.

It was a two-day journey from Deir-ez-Zor to Tel Tamar. We had to cross a wide strip of desert (there were many gazelle and Altounian's driver chased them across the sands much to my annoyance and broke the springs of his car doing it), and slept at Hassache. Our friend there was Captain Nairn, a mobilized missionary of the Church of Scotland; he was not happy with his French colleagues. Indeed Hassache seemed a desolate place, and all the wide desert country round it seemed sinister and forbidding, until we at last reached Tel Tamar and the Spears clinic boys in their sugar-loaf mud dwelling.

They were a remarkable team, those F.A.U. boys at Tel Tamar, and our Dr. Sheirajan had already earned the confidence of the wild district. They had opened the small hospital that had been given by the League of Nations to the Assyrians before the war and had made it the medical center of the Jezere. It was a modest affair, built of mud like all the village houses, a series of sugar loaves placed one against the other, but it had an adequate operating room, the Bedouins from their scattered camps and the Kurds from their district villages as well as the Assyrian Christians crowded its humble rooms and Sheirajan, who was an excellent surgeon, had saved many lives and given sight to many who were blind. But they were crying out for quinine.

Ras-el-Ain where Abraham waited for Sarah, Kamaechley on the Turkish

border. Smallpox was raging and our Spears Mission officer was in serious trouble with the tribes who were hoarding wheat; back to Hassache and Deir-ez-Zor and south to Palmyra where we visited the lovely ruins with an escort of the Camel Corps and slept in the cool house of the French commandant; and so to Damascus and home.

A wide country of great distances, with only one railway running across it to Mosul and that most of the way on the other side of the Turkish frontier. Isolated British officers, each with a French colleague, coaxing precious wheat from the tribes, and small groups of steady British boys washing the eyes of innumerable children who need not be blind, cleansing innumerable hideous sores that need not be dirty, vaccinating for smallpox, dealing with dysentery and malaria and tuberculosis. It would be a pity, I thought, if we, the French and the British who had invaded this land and turned it into a vast military camp, should fall to quarreling.

#### IV

The world of Beirut was very different from Damascus, its people being Christian or used to living in a Christian community were much easier to know.

Those we met first were not the ardent protagonists of independence, they were the rich cosmopolitan set who had long looked to France as the arbiter of taste and the source of refined pleasures. They spoke fluent French, and less fluent English. They were in the habit of going to Paris each year, the women to buy clothes, the men to attend the race meetings at Long-champs and Auteuil. The war had made that impossible; they were prisoners in their own country and rather bored. To entertain us gave them something to do and they did it very well—they had wonderful cooks.

The men of this set were bankers and landed proprietors. They owned villages and olive groves and large wheat fields. Some of their fortunes had been founded on wheat. Some, Emile Eddé was supposed to be one, were said to grow hashish. They were very rich as they paid no taxes to speak of. Their chief amusements were horse racing and cards, but not many played for high stakes. There was something childlike about them, a certain innocence in their gay friendliness that was very pleasing. And they could easily be snubbed. Madame Catroux seemed to take pleasure in snubbing them. And even Madame de Larminat could be very rude.

There were races every Sunday in Beirut and on every saint's day as well. The racecourse was charmingly set amid umbrella pines with the mountains

lifting their snowy peaks in the distance; and the Arab horses that ran were beautiful little creatures.

Donna Maria Sursock owned the racecourse and would receive me in her box when I went to a meeting. She is a handsome woman, an Italian of the Colonna family who had married a rich Lebanese. She was rather too Italian in those days for my taste and we were not on intimate terms, but she had a charming daughter who had been to school in England and always had an English "miss" in attendance. Yvonne Sursock was much sought after by the British officers of IXth Army.

The older women, like the men, played cards a great deal. Bridge and a game called pinochle. There were women's bridge parties every afternoon, and in the evenings they would meet at the Aero Club. The Aero Club had been started to encourage flying but had taken to cards instead. If I had a free evening I would ring up Habib Trad and he would arrange a four at the club. We would play from nine to twelve, then, if it were winter, a servant would bring us rich hot chocolate and brioche. My bridge cronies in the early days were usually the same and included Habib Trad or his brother and Alice Sabbag. Alice always smoked a hubble-bubble while she played. Many of the women smoked these water pipes. It was the one noticeably oriental habit that they clung to. Even Linda Sursock, who was much traveled and probably the most intelligent woman of her set, could spend a long idle afternoon on a divan with a hubble-bubble. Her house was a luxurious mixture of East and West. Priceless rugs hung on the walls of her large central hall (some had been shown at Burlington House). There was a room lined in old Damascus paneling with a divan running round it and a fountain in the center whose basin she always kept filled with heavily scented flowers—so filled that Brigadier Clayton, not noticing, stepped straight into it with a tremendous splash one night when we took him to Linda's to dinner and had to be lent a pair of gray flannels by the son of the house. Linda had been a friend of the Catroux' from the days of their early romance and was presumably pro-French in sentiment; but she never talked politics, she was discreet, enigmatic and rather mysterious. Her good looks had an antique cast. She would have figured very well on the walls of a Pharaoh's tomb.

Strangely enough Alice Tueni's was the only interior that had the authentic French stamp and she had been brought up in England.

Dear Alice Tueni. Tiny, quick, with a sweet soprano voice, she was like a bird and she would often sing to us. She had a grand piano, a great rarity in Beirut, and what was even more rare, shelves full of music. Hamish Macken-

zie, our third secretary, and Burnet Pavit, who was political officer in those days in the Bekaa, were both musicians (Burnet is an excellent pianist), and were constantly going to the Tuenis' to borrow music or play on the lovely piano. I would go with them sometimes and sit listening to Chopin or Bach. In the summer, I would paint in the garden, it was a wild unbelievable jungle of color. May was the most beautiful month when the jacarandas were in bloom. Then all the streets of Beirut would be hung with blue banners.

I became very fond of my Lebanese friends. They were not perhaps very weighty, nor did they seem to have any very serious sense of responsibility to their own people, but they were gentle and sensitive, they had charming manners and if the women talked a great deal without saying very much, their talk was never unkind, and if I asked them to help me in any way, with my Xmas parcels or hospitality for the British troops, how quick they were to respond. Our A.D.C.'s office would be stocked before Xmas with hundreds of cakes. One had only to express a wish and it was fulfilled. A tea party for twenty-five convalescents from the 23rd General Hospital? A banquet was spread. Would a series of tea parties be possible? But of course. Three a week, they would all take turns.

Zelfa and Camille Chamoun, Minister as I write of the Lebanese government to the Court of St. James, were a different type. We met them first through Bill Astor. They were not I gathered very well off but they shared with a cousin a house in the mountains where there was some rough shooting and they asked us up for the day. It had the charm of an Irish house, dilapidated and rather untidy; full of good cheer and children and dogs. Delicious smells from the kitchen mingled with the frosty air in its windy rooms. Camille was a good shot and loved the mountains. A real *Montagnard*. He loved his country too with passion. Zelfa had been brought up in the circle of the American University, and her handsome cousin Klodagh Tabet had brought herself up to be a firebrand. They were not at all French in their tastes, this family. On the contrary Klodagh's brother had spent the best part of the past seven years in French prisons and she herself had been locked up for some weeks. They were the first keen Lebanese patriots I had come to know; they took their politics very seriously and would have little or nothing to do with what they alluded to as the Sursock crowd, who were all, they declared, pro-French.

It seemed unnecessary and foolish to me at this period to discriminate between the pro-French and the pro-British Lebanese. Our pleasant days were spent, if not in a war atmosphere, against a background of warlike activity. The country was full of British troops, new camps, new airfields;

great hospitals were springing up, defenses were building all along the road to Damascus and new roads were cutting everywhere across the mountains. That the peoples of the Levant should play the British off against the French was the last thing we wanted. It would help no one if we took to quarreling.

Madame Catroux would state this, every so often. "We must be friends, *ma chère*, it would never do if these people thought we didn't agree."

"But we are. We do, don't we?"

We met constantly and if there were signs that the sympathy so often expressed was not very genuine, if one after another nice young French officers who were particularly friendly to nice young British officers were removed from Beirut—and if sometimes they liked to come to our house and their names appeared often in our guest book and they lost their jobs at the *Grand Sérail* as a result and disappeared into the wilderness—well, I couldn't very well accuse Margot of turning the pages of the book in my front hall to find out.

I wish now that I had come out into the open and had asked her why, if we were friends, she did such things and why, if we were allies, she and her husband didn't put an end to all the jealousy and suspicion in their entourage. I think it might have helped. It could have done no harm. I didn't. I never mentioned the affair of the clinic at Selimieh. I let it pass like the rest and we rubbed along.

What time I had for myself I knew only too well how to spend. I would be away into the mountains, or up the Barada River with my painting paraphernalia, or would go down to the harbor and sit on the terrace of the Quarantine Office and paint the fishing boats tied up to the quay. B. shared a small sailing boat with Robin Hutchins. He would try to take Sunday off and would go out for a part of the day on the water, or we would visit Baalbek or the crusader castle of the *Crac le Chevalier*, or drive up the Valley of Adonis or to the fragile Arab palace of *Bet el Dene* where Lamartine had lived for a time. In winter B. and Francis Stonor would go shooting, and I would persuade Dan Lascelles to come and he and I would be parked somewhere with our paints while the others went off after woodcock or partridge. I am no painter, but was compelled to paint. For I was in love with the land and the sky. I was fascinated by the old crooked trunks of the olive trees and the great eucalyptuses with fronds hanging down like the tresses of gods in the sun, and the deep mysterious valleys and the queer sinister shapes of their rocky sides and the light—I was in love with the wonderful soft full light that poured down round me and through me

and seemed to fill, not only my eyes with beauty, but my body with an essence that was life-giving and had something to do with the source of pure happiness.

And so the autumn of '42 became the winter of '43. General Leclerc's forces moved up from the Chad in January to occupy Murzak and Sibla. President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill met at Casablanca and the VIIIth Army pushing past Tripoli crossed the Tunisian border. I was with the unit again early in February, this time once more in Tobruk.



## CHAPTER XXII

### I

1943 appears from my diary to have been a year crowded with incident. B. and I seem to have been continually on the move, sometimes together, more often separately. There were conferences in Cairo and Jerusalem. B. was called to Cairo in February to see Winston on his way through. We found a house at last in Damascus and I kept running back and forth across the Palestinian border to fetch pots and pans from Haifa and Tel Aviv. B. went to England in the summer, leaving Dan as chargé d'affaires. I went three times to rejoin the unit, once by road to Tobruk, twice airborne to Tunisia. I wrote at the beginning of February from *Bet el Azrac*, the Caseys' house at Mena.

B., Dan, Francis and I came down to Cairo a week ago by car, motoring through a blizzard as far as Jerusalem. The MacMichaels kindly put us up for the night. Winston was still in Turkey when we arrived but lunched here on Tuesday with Alan Brooke, Alec Cadogan, Sholto Douglas and Randolph. I thought he looked tired. He said to Maie, "I'm old but I'll last it out." B. had an hour alone with him and seemed happy about things.

We often stayed with the MacMichaels in beautiful Government House in Jerusalem. The problems of Palestine and the Levant were far from identical but they were interlinked and B. was always glad of the chance to discuss them with Harold MacMichael. I doubt if Great Britain has ever had a high commissioner in that torn and troubled country more able than MacMichael or one who steered a steadier course more quietly. I felt the tension and the menace immediately on crossing the frontier, but I do not know to this day whether Sir Harold was pro-Jew or pro-Arab in his heart. I fancy he didn't allow his heart to come into it. If he felt strongly one way or the other, he never showed it and indeed never talked to me of his many preoccupations. He talked about Professor Joad's *God and Evil*, about old seals, of which he had a valuable collection, or about the back-

ground of the life of Christ that was written obscurely in the stones of the city and countryside. He could be witty, but his penetrating gaze was somber.

I remember that we had not intended to go to Jerusalem; but to fly direct to Cairo and that we waited until the last minute hoping that our plane could take off, so that we left Beirut very late and only reached the border after dark. It was snowing hard, there were two police cars waiting to escort us. I thought it unnecessary and scoffed at such elaborate precautions. I was wrong. MacMichael was ambushed on the same road not long after and when Lord Moyne was murdered in Cairo, B. was informed that he must not motor, even in Beirut, without police protection as the Stern gang had declared that they were going to bump off the leading British representatives in the Middle East and he was next on the list.

The MacMichaels never betrayed any sign of nervousness or apprehension. They were always calm and cordial and the lovely house was beautifully run, but there was something in the atmosphere that made one feel that one was in a fortress, and I used to wonder if Lady MacMichael enjoyed driving herself about alone. She didn't tell me. She was very active as president of the Red Cross, and went everywhere, Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Sarafand and Bethlehem, driving her own small car. If her face at times when she came home was grim, she didn't explain why. But our evenings by the log fire in the drawing room were I believe particularly cozy because for a few hours she could relax and enjoy the luxury of feeling perfectly safe.

The Caseys' house at Mena was very different. It belongs to Chester Beatty, who lent it to the Minister of State when Oliver Lyttelton came to Cairo in this capacity, and the latter handed it on to Dick. It had not been built for an official residence and was much less grand than the Embassy. It was in fact quite small and unbearably hot in summer, as the rooms all opened out onto a tiled courtyard that gave back a blinding glare; and it was infested with mosquitoes. I am not bothered much by mosquitoes, they don't like me, but at Mena I was devoured, for the finely woven mosquito nets on our beds were full of holes. The Caseys, bless their hearts, didn't seem to mind. They had no liking for pomp and ceremony, nor did Maie care for housekeeping.

They were breezy and gay, they were generous and free, there was a touch of recklessness about them, something youthful and daring and true that made them very endearing. Their Egyptian servants cheated them shamelessly and they didn't care. They hadn't time to bother about trifles. Margaret Gilruth, Maie Casey's delightful secretary, would worry about bills, but Maie would toss them aside. "We are living on our capital anyhow."

My instinct on first meeting Maie Casey had been true. We became friends and managed to see a good deal of each other. The house at Mena was always open to me. I had to stop off at Cairo on my way to the unit and I knew when the Beirut plane circled down over El Maza airfield that I would see a small figure standing in the sun with the wide sands of Egypt spreading round her. And there she always was, such a pretty thing, usually in a tailored coat and skirt of striped Damascus silk, white and mauve—we had bought the silk together one day in the suhks—with a large floppy hat on her curly gray head, and she would say, "Oh boy, but I'm glad to see you," for she talked like that to remind us that her heart was in the Australian bush.

Or it would be the other way round. Dick had to cover the whole of the Middle East; he traveled a great deal by plane and would drop her off at Beirut or Damascus to stay with us. She would ring up and say:

"Hello darling, Dick has to go to Teheran on Tuesday. Can I stay with you for three days?"

"Lovely. We'll be in Damascus."

"Then I'll get him to drop me at Mezzé airdrome."

"Beautiful."

"Let's do some painting. Done any painting lately? How's it going? The Barada? What's that? Oh, the river. What color rocks? Flamingo pink? Go on. Rocks aren't flamingo pink."

A man's voice would break in: "Is this a military call?" And hers would answer, "Of course it's a military call."

She came with me to Tobruk on that February trip in '43. She was eager to visit the unit and wore an Australian trooper's hat during the trip by way of compliment to the division that had stood the siege of the tragic town in 1940. We traveled by road and spent a night on the way with Admiral Harwood at Navy House in Alexandria. Admiral Godefroy of the French Navy was still in Alex with his ships lying at anchor as they'd been when Rommel advanced to within sixty miles. No efforts on the part of the British Navy or the British government had prevailed upon him to hand them over to the Allies, or place them at the disposal of General de Gaulle. Threats, blandishments, arguments, all had failed. Godefroy carried calmly on with his pleasant life of masterly inactivity. He played, it seemed, a good game of golf, and the British government continued to provide the funds for the payroll of this fleet that would not fight. I believe indeed that shortly before our descent on Admiral Harwood, the Frenchman had put forward a demand for an increase of pay for several of his officers on the ground

that they had received promotion during their long months of idleness. I find a note in my diary under February 19, '43.

British admirals are extraordinary people. Harwood could find nothing but good to say of the Frenchman Godefroy. He apologized for him all through dinner. Maie very upset when we left. I pointed out our old haunts as we sped along the road I know so well. Dabaa, Sidi Barani, Buq Buq, Solum. That fine N.A.A.F.I., the Ark, that served us so well at Dabaa is gone together with almost everything else. Two armies, Rommel's and Monty's, have swept over this desert since I went down the road and there isn't much left. The pink walls of the gaping house in Solum that used to make a pretty frame for the blue sea have fallen. The desolation is complete. But it is spring and the desert is covered with wild flowers. Every wadi is knee deep in scarlet anemones, white marguerites, night-scented stock. The perfumed air flowed through the car as we traveled. Our camp is a mass of color, and Jocelyn is busy making faithful drawings of the exquisite things. Every flower you can think of, but all in miniature. She says she has collected ninety different kinds.

The unit is in fine shape, but was in the throes of a drama when we arrived. T. W.'s boxer bitch had developed rabies, bitten Thibaut and licked half a dozen of the M.T.C. girls who had scratches on their hands. So Thibaut, Barbara, T. W., Biddy and Rachel were all dispatched to Cairo for treatment.

Great pother at El Adam airdrome over sending them off. The wing commander in charge, anxious and helpful, but bewildered by their ribaldry. One of them began barking on the airfield as they waited, and Barbara said, "Come on, time we dogs got on board." My girls certainly have a style of their own.

The hospital was on the escarpment above the harbor and near railhead. Our part of the camp, that is, our living quarters, looked, as I remember, like nothing so much as a collection of allotments or squatters' huts. Jean and Pat Barr had been married in Alex and had built themselves a Peter Pan house on the edge of a wadi from loot they had collected in the sand. The door, windows and roof were from an Italian dump near by. The path to it led across a carpet of flowers and one could see down to the harbor from their small window; it had of course no windowpane.

Other members of the unit had gone in for building on a less ambitious scale. Rosie had made herself a house out of petrol tins. The roof blew off

nearly every day. Several of the boys had elaborate dwellings but of peculiar shape. The general effect was striking, especially on washing day, and I made a caustic comment but the colonel laughed me out of my disapproval. If the hospital was neat and tidy what did the rest matter? They weren't very busy and they wouldn't stay long. They were merely waiting for the division to move on into Tunisia.

A festive visit in spite of the rabies scare. The VIIIth Army had crossed the Tunisian border on January 29 and Ist Army with Giraud's North African French were moving up, if slowly, from Algiers. It was the time when men talked of a race between Monty and Anderson. Who would reach Tunis first? General Eisenhower had been appointed C. in C. in North Africa with General Alex, as he was affectionately called by so many, to second him. Great events were preparing and our officers were in a high state of hope and excitement. The French colony of Tunisia would soon be theirs once more. Their admiration for General Montgomery was unbounded, the pride of the men at being a part of VIIIth Army was touching. This is a fact of considerable historic importance. The officers and men of the Ist Free French Division have never lost their feeling for the VIIIth British Army. It was a bitter disappointment to them that Algiers would not allow them to wear the North Africa Star. I know this because I took the matter up on behalf of my unit. My girls who had spent two years in the desert with VIIIth Army were incensed when they were forbidden to wear it because they had been attached to a French division and I was incensed for them so the question was raised in the highest quarters and the final answer was that the decoration had been offered to the Ist Free French Division and refused by the government of Algiers.

The facts should be known. There are many men in France who still believe that the British withheld the ribbon they coveted more than any in the whole war. What is of the greatest importance and indeed will be I believe a factor in history is that these men will continue to feel bound to the British as comrades and brothers-in-arms for as long as they live. They are not a great number, but they count, for they are, to my mind, the best that France has to offer.

How glad they all were during those days of waiting on the El Adam escarpment. What a welcome they gave me. How they scoffed at the Moustachios, as they called the North African French. De Gaulle was their man. No one else. None had a good word for Giraud. Our colonel was the most fiery and uncompromising of the lot. He spat out the word "Moustachio" as if the mere sound made him sick, then would go trotting off calling for Mike to help organize a football team.

We went round the dreadful harbor one day in a naval launch, moving slowly between the sunken ships. Some lay well out of the water and leaned on their sides as if with great weariness. We could see into the water-washed cabins, follow the gangway down into the obscurity beneath the shimmering surface. What lay below, I wondered, in that tragic depth? Nothing now surely but broken wood and rusted iron.

I visited Nick Alderson's lonely grave with Michael and some of the boys. They had put up a strong wooden cross with his name clearly marked. But some of the names in the cemetery of Tobruk were almost obliterated. Many of the graves were buried under a tangle of wild flowers. Jocelyn came with me and took a photograph of Captain Wilder's grave for Lady Mac-Michael. How long it seemed since I had come on the Black Watch in their little camp near Baalbek. It was Rosie, I see in my diary, who went with me to Bir Hakim. I find this entry:

February 15th, '43. Visited Bir Hakim today. Rosie found a rabbit hole in the sand which she insists was her home. How sad the camp was! The utter silence, the solitude, the scraps strewn in the sand; forgotten relics of boisterous fighting men. A tattered book on horseracing in English (it might have been T. W.'s.), an old boot.

And then on February 25:

Feeling still runs high in the division over the Moustachios. Michael Knox has been to see us. He says that De Gaulle is arriving in Algiers in a fortnight (he was wrong) and that there will be no rapprochement with Giraud for a long time. The unit he informs me is going to Tripoli, a drive of 1100 miles. If only I could go with them.

I didn't. I went back to Beirut, and missed the drive from Tobruk, not to Tripoli as they had thought, but far beyond to Sidi Bouali near Enfidaville in Tunisia. It was Barbara who led the girls on that long journey. They left Tobruk the middle of April, were fourteen days on the road, and arrived in fine style. I heard about their exploits from the A.D.M.S. when I re-joined them the middle of May. "Any number of officers have asked me," he said, "what unit it was that they met on the road with all those girl drivers. They'd never seen better driving or better road manners. A fine performance. They all said the same."

Barbara wrote me the following letter at the end of it.

May 1st, '43

My dear May,

Well we have joined the battle again at last. The long convoy run was the greatest fun and I think enjoyed by most. The division moved "en bloc," the 1st Brigade a day ahead of us, we were at the end of the 2nd Brigade convoy with only the "Lourde" behind us, to pick up the dead trucks. We did 100 to 110 miles a day and it took all day with incessant halts for this and that. We were all well stocked with N.A.A.F.I. so each halt was an occasion for a snack. We were very short of drivers so every available officer was driving, also the M.T.C. took over the water buggies as well as the staff cars. The latter were none the less laden and you would not believe the paraphernalia of cat-baskets, empty shell-cases and other battle debris converted to some use by the Nannies. Apart from my own junk the back of my car had to house the pigeons in a flat tea-case, because—ill-timed gesture—they started to sit on their two eggs before we left, so they had to travel in comfort. They behaved as well as everyone else, taking their airing in the evening sky in turns and rewarded me by hatching their chicks on Easter Saturday under (nearly) the shadow of Marble Arch (Gulf of Sidi). I announced to the colonel with pride the addition of two to the unit's strength and everyone was pleased.

We had practically no trouble with the vehicles. Rosie spent some time and several nights with the "Lourde" changing half shafts etc. but was always mobile the next morning.

The second night we stayed in a green valley near Giovanni Berta. Frightfully cold. I froze all night in my battle-dress under six blankets. Not at all pleased to see Brosset in the cold dawn in immaculate shorts, "très sport" who came at 6 A. M. to see how we were doing.

We drove through the Italian colonies symmetrical and barren. Near the towns the colonists lined the roads with outstretched hands crying, "Biscotti Signorettis" against a background of little square houses with Fascist slogans, "Vincere moi" etc. One had a childish desire to reply, "Vinceremo moi. Ha! Ha!"

Stayed two nights 18 kms. south of Benghazi, one of the nastiest bits of desert I've seen. Round the Gulf of Sidi, still so heavily mined that even the ditches by the roadside weren't safe, and mines lying about everywhere. Once or twice we stayed very close to the sea and had a chance to bathe. We were by now well organized and however late we got in, the kitchen always had a hot meal of sorts ready by the time we had bivouacked, and as we got well into our blankets a sudden burst of laughter from a truck or a three-year-old nostalgic tune from someone's gramo-

phone would shatter the silence, till at last the camp would fall into deep quiet.

As you know we were supposed to go to a place south of Tripoli but the night before we arrived there, came the cheering news that we were to push on to the Tunisian front and relieve the New Zealand Division near Enfidaville, so we shot through as fast as maybe to Trigala, west of Sousse before going up into the line, and celebrated our first night on French colonial soil drinking sweet champagne produced and cherished for months and miles in his truck by Père Boileau. The colonel and I came up to Sidi Bouali next day and met the charming colonel of the N.Z.C.C.'s, who had already found us a fine *emplacement* in an olive grove about eight miles behind our lines. So here we are, the hospital is setting up, the division moving into the line and we shall probably be working again tomorrow.

## II

Changes had been taking place meanwhile in the Levant and at first seemed to suggest that we were entering on a period of happy collaboration with the French. General Catroux re-established the constitution in both states and decided in March to hold free elections waiving his right to appoint a third of the deputies. He chose as head of the interim government in Syria Ata-Bey Ayoubi, a Moslem of great dignity and integrity; in the Lebanon a doctor by the name of Ayoub Tabet. The comic rascal Tajedine was dead and President Naccache now faded into the obscurity from which he had only half emerged.

B. was pleased. It really looked—to use his own words—as if Catroux meant business. What pleased him almost as much as this sign of good faith on the part of his French colleague was the very considerable achievement of the Spears Mission. Founded to help the French organize the resources of the country for war, it had been faced at the outset with two great difficulties. The French had shown no interest in the herculean undertaking and the Syrians, whose friendly co-operation was essential, refused to collaborate with the French. And yet in spite of this, the mission had achieved a great measure of success. For B. would not admit defeat. He had dragged the *Grand Sérail* into his schemes as partners on the one hand; he had, on the other, cajoled and reasoned and even at times bullied the Syrians into working with the French officers sent out into the country to collect wheat, supervise new irrigation schemes and organize the sale and distribution of olive oil. Other activities of the mission were purely British; one, B.'s special pet,



was a scheme to revive the moribund silk industry. The mulberry trees had been allowed to die. It was a question of importing new plants and encouraging the villagers. I remember at one time being told that B. was buying up all the silk thread in the country, that the weavers of Damascus could make no more brocade. Parachutes took the place of those lustrous fabrics. The silkworms of the Lebanon provided us in the end with forty thousand.

The economic problems were all but insuperable. The cost of living was soaring, the Arabs were hoarding wheat, the people had to be fed. There were bread riots in Damascus, there was a potato famine in Egypt and Palestine. There had been no attempt at control or rationing. To come to grips with all this we needed experts and B. got them, from London, from Palestine, from Cairo. The economic section alone of the Spears Mission was a formidable affair, B. the driving power behind it, and the *Grand Sérail* gave what contribution it could, but it was inevitable that most of the work should be done by the mission. At one time the most pressing question was to check inflation. Gold must be sold; as there were no gold sovereigns, tola bars were imported from London. Then a system of rationing was introduced and to make this effective a census had to be taken in all the cities, Beirut, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo etc. The French lacked the personnel even had they had the will to undertake such tasks. It was the Spears Mission that provided the staff, the British government the funds. B. bore the main responsibility with a British treasury official to advise him. Colonel Howard Jones, our agricultural expert, had no opposite number among the French. His experimental farms and his potato crops were his own affair. If large tracts of arid land became fruitful, it was his doing. A quiet man who spoke almost in a whisper, he would wander into our garden to see how the grass was growing—he had brought the seed himself from Palestine—then drift away to the Bekaa or the Jezere to murmur words of wisdom into the ears of a wondering peasantry or coax an Arab chief into sowing a new kind of grain.

Wheat had been the great problem and wheat the outstanding success of the mission. In '41 we had been obliged to import 80,000 tons of wheat in British ships that could ill be spared. The deficit was turned in '43 into a surplus of 150,000, and B. had built up a joint organization, British, French, Syrian and Lebanese, called the O.C.P. to assure the distribution and control the price of grain, with General Catroux and himself as a committee of two at its head. And then, just when the barometer at last was set fair, General Catroux was transferred to Algiers and was replaced in the Levant by Monsieur Helleu.

I believe this to have been a calamity. I am convinced that had General

Catroux remained on in Beirut, the crisis of November '43 would have been averted. I don't know if B. or Dan would agree with me. I only speak for myself. I know that General Catroux and B. often disagreed, that there were times when things came almost to breaking point; but they didn't break. Their collaboration, while he was there, never did break down for General Catroux was pliable as well as tenacious, he was not like some of his colleagues, obsessed by a sense of his own dignity nor so jealous of French prestige that he could tolerate no effort that did not emanate from the *Grand Sérail*. He was a man of the world with a wide experience, he was subtle and deep and an able negotiator; he had great charm. I wrote when I heard that he was leaving:

April 23rd. General Catroux has wired to his wife from London to meet him in Algiers and as she says she refuses to live there, I gather that she does intend to and will soon be packing up.

He and B. are well matched as duelists and I think B. will miss him if only as a stimulus when he goes to North Africa.

And on the twenty-ninth:

Madame Catroux is in Algiers, she says for a week, but I think he and she will move there quite soon and that Helleu is to succeed him in Beirut. Helleu comes from Ankara where he has been Vichy Ambassador, but we no longer boggle at such things.

I shall miss Margot. Her very unreliability makes her interesting. You never know whether she is going to bite or caress. She can be witty, charming and savage all at the same time. And her indiscretions are fascinating. If you know how to edit her talk you can learn a great deal. Her great quality is vitality—she stimulates. Yes, I am sorry that she is going.

Monsieur and Madame Helleu were very different from the Catroux'. He was small and feeble, with a scarlet nose, a plaintive voice and a continual simper; she was statuesque, early Victorian, very correct and must have been remarkably handsome at one time; I think she was very unhappy. It soon became evident that he was quite incapable of filling, even moderately well, the post General Catroux had vacated. He would disappear for days, the gossips said with a supply of whisky bottles, leaving Boegner and Baelen in charge of the *Grand Sérail* and his proud unbending wife alone at the

*Résidence des Pins*. It wasn't long before Boegner held everything French, including his miserable chief, in his scrawny, prehensile, fanatically anti-British hands. I felt very sorry for Madame Helleu.

## III

Mr. Casey summoned a meeting of the Middle East War Council for the beginning of May, and B. and I went down for it, staying with them for a week at Mena. I then rejoined the unit at Sidi Bouali. General Brereton commanding the American Air Force in the M.E. very kindly took me as far as Kerowan in his magnificent plane. A delightful trip in frightful weather. I wrote on May 16:

Arrived in Cairo a week ago and have been in a whirl ever since. The Cornwallises from Baghdad, Sir Reeder Bullard from Teheran, the Mac-Michaels from Jerusalem, and six commanders in chief, Jumbo Wilson, General Platt, Sholto Douglas, General Pownwall etc. Dinners every night and lunches every day. Alexander Kirk gave a dinner and dispensed hospitality unrivaled by any Eastern potentate. Maie was on his right, I was on his left, we were both buddies of his. The long bridal table all crystal and white leaves in the immense shadowy room was dramatic. We recalled the parties he used to give in Rome. He is full of gloom about Italy. The party was I think for Mortimer Davis, or perhaps just to please himself.

I gather that the conference has been a success and is sending resolutions to London which will not be well received. Why can't London trust the men on the spot when they are all agreed? Baghdad, Teheran, Palestine, Egypt and the Red Sea constitute one problem surely, not many.

All fighting in North Africa stopped the day before yesterday. Am leaving for Tunis tomorrow but have missed the bus!

May 20th. This is the nicest camp we've ever had. The tents are dispersed in an olive grove about ten miles from Enfidaville on a rise with a view over lovely grass country to the mountains. Everyone happy thanks to victory, lots of work and Barbara.

Pat Barr is to receive the *Croix de guerre* for his work in the forward unit. He went up with Thibaut and Jibery to a place called Tacrouna just below the mountain our troops call Edinburgh Castle, they were heavily shelled as they were surrounded by troops. Pat says they moved back a hundred yards when it got too hot and put up a big Red Cross and were not shelled after that.

General de Larminat is very pleased with them all and the colonel is as proud as a little peacock.

Biddy and T. W. had a charming idea. The XIth Hussars were moving back to Tripolitania after being the first to enter Tunis and had to pass by our camp on their way, so the girls knowing my general was very attached to his old regiment asked one of the officers, a friend of theirs, to stop and see me. He turned up at seven in the morning outside my tent with a tow-headed smiling youngster who looked about sixteen, and introduced him saying, "Tell General Spears that this chap was the first man to enter Tunis." It seems he went tearing in on his motorcycle to find the German military police still regulating the traffic and shot past, hoping the rest of the regiment would follow; they did.

A very tricky situation seems to have arisen among the French in this part of the world, and they seem to be dragging us into a mess with the Americans. The feeling between the Gaullists and the Giraudists is very explosive, and the Americans are apparently backing Giraud. Giraud is on the spot (Algiers). De Gaulle is—where? I don't know. In London I suppose. Nevertheless the Free French are recruiting with such success in Tunisia that the Giraudists are badly worried and General Eisenhower has ordered the recruiting to stop. Our people, i.e., the colonel and all the Free French in hospital, are livid about this. They refuse to have any truck with the Moustachios and say the latter openly boast of their continued allegiance to Pétain.

To add to the confusion there seems to be a conflict among certain elements, high up, of the Free French as to how to deal with the situation. There are those apparently who want to drop the *Croix de Lorraine* and the name Free French and weld the whole lot together, while others don't trust the North African French and are in a fever lest Eisenhower or rather Roosevelt, should persuade Churchill to throw over De Gaulle and play with Vichy.

De Larminat gave nothing away when I lunched with him, but the colonel and all our people are very excited and Michael Knox came over to see me breathing fire. He out-Caesars Caesar where De Gaulle is concerned. De Gaulle wouldn't come to Algiers, he declared, until the psychological moment. He was going to get North Africa, make no mistake about that. If De Larminat was put to it, he'd fight. Fight whom? I asked. The Americans, the Giraudists—anybody. What right had Eisenhower to order recruiting to stop? General Juin wasn't a bad sort. He'd said: "Move your recruiting office round the corner and I won't say anything."

Orders have come from the Xth Corps that we are to be ready to move on the 30th. All the VIIIth Army is moving down to Tripolitania to re-form and we are to go with it. Reilinger and Vernier and everybody else very keen to stay with VIIIth Army. But Knox showed me a letter from De Larminat to Xth Corps stating that he had been ordered by General de Gaulle to remain in Tunisia and asking to be allowed a month's repos on French soil for his troops. The real object is recruiting and also I believe the determination not to hand over Tunisia to Giraud. Knox's talk of revolution very wild, but my impression is that many decent men want to join the Gaullists while it seems to be true that Giraud's forces are largely made up of men still loyal to Pétain.

Later:

Madame Catroux descended on us yesterday. Her first words to me were, "*Ma chère, il faut que vous m'aidez. Il n'y a plus de soldats Gaullists, il n'y a que les Français. Cette histoire de recrutement est odieuse. Il faut que cela cesse.*"<sup>1</sup>

She stayed to tea and several young officers turned up to whom she had given rendezvous in our camp, among them her stepson and De Courcelles, De Gaulle's former A.D.C., the one who came with him to England from Bordeaux in B.'s plane. Madame C.'s talk was very curious. The whole trend to run down De Gaulle and laugh at the *Croix de Lorraine*. I played the village idiot. Among other things she said Giraud had ordered all Gaullists to be sent to England. That was too much for me. I said, "What! the whole division?" She looked startled, then waved aside the unpleasant notion that all De Gaulle's Ist Division was Gaullist and said she meant the men who were coming over from France to join him. Re De Gaulle's own arrival in Algiers, she said that "Georges" had gone with Harold MacMillan to fetch him, that naturally he could not bring his entourage, there was no *logement* in Algiers. De Courcelles asked with a subtlety that she seemed to miss: "*Et vous, êtes-vous bien logée, madame?*" She smiled. "*Ah oui. Nous nous avons une très belle résidence. Nous pouvons donner une chambre et un bureau au Général de Gaulle dans notre maison.*" She smiled again—the smile of a tiger. At the same time she alluded to Giraud as "*Ce pauvre Giraud,*" and whispered savagely in my ear as she was leaving—"I know who is at the bottom of all this, it's De Larminat."

The colonel told me after she had gone that she had given a dressing

<sup>1</sup> "My dear, you must help me. There are no Gaullist troops now, there are only French troops. This recruiting affair is odious, it must stop."

down to two of our wounded when she was doing the round of the wards. I wasn't there, but I knew the two men. They had been in Giraud's N.A. Army and had come over to join the Free French Division in time to take part in the battle. Madame Catroux alluded to them as "*Mauvais soldats, mauvais Français.*"

I have copied the extract from my diary because it reflects the extreme confusion in North Africa at that time and the precariousness of General de Gaulle's position. That, I have been told since, was his real reason for ordering De Larminat to remain in Tunisia instead of obeying VIIIth Army orders and going with Xth Corps to Tripolitania. He did go, however, early in June, and the unit went with him. They spent three months in Zuara, but it was the end of the division's service with VIIIth Army. When I visited the unit again in October they were back in Tunisia at Khanguet, but much had happened. Eighth Army had gone. It had crossed to Sicily in July and the Americans had moved in. The French Committee of National Liberation in Algiers with De Gaulle and Giraud as co-chiefs had been recognized by the Allies in August and General Catroux had become governor general of Algeria. Madame Catroux too had been made a general.

More important to me was Barbara's imminent departure. She was leaving the unit for good this time and was going to be married in Cairo to Major Jennings Bramley. General Maast, governor of Tunisia, came to inspect the unit before she left and decorated us both with the *Nichan-If-Takar*, the Star of the Bey of Tunis, thanking her for the great services she had rendered to the French troops, and I think she was pleased, but it was a sad little ceremony for us all; officers, nurses, M.T.C. girls and the F.A.U. boys were sorry to see Barbara go. She had been a wise, whimsical, humorous boss, controlling her small body of individualists with a minimum display of authority, and her going meant that only three remained of the girls who had been with me in France in '39. Cynthia had come back from America but had gone again to marry Peter Smith Dorrien, and Rosie had been invalided home. Only T. W., Jean and Evelyn were left of the original unit, and there seemed to be no one person who could fill Barbara's place as my spokesman and representative. Michael Rowntree undertook to look after our finances and send the accounts direct to Dorea Stanhope, Jean became head sister but in all other matters I must throw the general responsibility on the colonel, and the colonel was deeply unhappy. He had received word that his wife, whom he had not seen since the outbreak of war, had died in hospital in Paris, that his four children were with his mother but would have to be boarded out somewhere, he didn't know where. He was

heartbroken and worried to the point of agony at being cut off from them. "You see how it is," he said. "She died in France and my children are in France, and France is in the hands of the enemy."

Then Jocelyn came to my tent one morning. I knew she had been hiding great anxiety over her husband for a long time. She had had one letter from India, telling her that he was going on a mission and she was not to worry if she didn't hear for three months, but the letter had been written over a year ago, and since, she had heard nothing. Now she came into my tent and said, "I've had rather a shock. Delhi has sent back all my letters to Basil, I got them yesterday." She gave a small convulsive laugh. "They make a big bundle."

She didn't break down. She only trembled slightly and looked at me with a smile jerking her mouth.

"Of course I know that it doesn't mean he is dead. It is only that they don't see any point in keeping all these old letters. I'm sure he'll turn up one of these days; even if he was dropped in Burma I know he'll get out. But it was a bit of a shock." And she gave another convulsive laugh. Poor Jocelyn, she never heard from Basil again.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### I

WE GAVE a dinner party in Beirut on November 10, '43, in honor of King Peter of Yugoslavia. We couldn't have felt less like giving a dinner party, indeed the events of the past three days were calculated to spoil any mixed party of French, British and Lebanese, for all our bright hopes of happy collaboration with the French had come to nothing. The elections had been held in the summer and ever since then a struggle had been going on between the newly elected Lebanese government and the French, until it had now reached a crisis that threatened the peace of the Levant. The struggle had in fact culminated that morning in an official note to the Lebanese Premier from the French delegation informing him that the invitation to his government to attend the military review next day in celebration of the Armistice of 1918 was withdrawn; his Ministers would not be expected to attend. The diplomatic corps had met on hearing of this and had decided to excuse themselves from the ceremony and IXth Army had taken the same decision.

It wasn't therefore quite the moment to enjoy an evening with the chief French delegate and his wife. But King Peter was staying with them at the *Résidence des Pins*. He had come up from Cairo on a visit to Monsieur Helleu and it was the British Minister's duty to entertain him, so we had asked the young King and three of his staff, his hosts Monsieur and Madame Helleu, Monsieur Chataigneau, Secretary General of the French delegation, and Madame Chataigneau and the Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Monsieur Tacla and his wife; and because of King Peter we couldn't very well put them off, though none of our guests, with the possible exception of the young King and his staff, could have wanted to come and none I believe, with the same possible exceptions, enjoyed the evening.

I did not, and I knew that B. was very worried for all his affable flow of easy talk at the dinner table. There were signs that I could read, as I watched his face beyond the lighted candles. He was talking to Madame Helleu about Guadeloupe (she came I believe from there) and the south of France, of a villa we had had one summer on the shore beyond Cannes and La Napoule



where the red rocks begin. He didn't talk to her about V——, that I know. For she was a stranger, her fine eyes were cold and inimical. He wouldn't talk to any of these strange French people of the place in France that he had once thought of as his home and where he had learned to speak their exact language more beautifully than they spoke it themselves because his tongue was enamored of its sounds. I don't know that he even thought of the old days at V—— that evening, but I did. I thought of the little *château* by the placid river and of old Anna the cook who made such delicious *purée de pommes de terre*, and Cousin Gaston in his corduroy jacket and quaint double-peaked cap and then I thought of our house in Paris and the whimsical proud beauties who had floated up the stairs to engage the company in a riot of badinage and fill the rooms with laughter. I could fit Madame Helleu and Madame Chataigneau into neither one nor the other; they were provincial women. Who indeed among all the French we had met in the Levant, with the exception of the Catroux', would have failed to ruin one of our little dinners in Paris when the battle of wits kept the table ringing with shouts and peals of laughter until everyone was talking at once and no one was allowed to finish a sentence? B. and I would end up when they had gone exhausted with too much joyous laughing. They didn't laugh, these French colonials, they sniggered and winked, or they simpered like the Ambassador, Monsieur Helleu, who was gazing at me out of glassy eyes. General de Gaulle had chosen strange people to represent him in the Levant.

No, B. and I were not enjoying our evening nor was Tony, his languid head bent above Madame Helleu's elaborate coiffure expressing the quintessence of boredom, nor Hamish, dear Hamish, who was crimson with suppressed excitement, nor Francis, who was very shocked that the French Ambassador should be tiddly when he arrived at the British Minister's house for dinner. But I may be wrong about Helleu. It is possible, knowing as he did what was going to happen, since he had arranged it all before coming, that he was amused. It may have given General Catroux's small, timid, bibulous successor a certain secret satisfaction to sit at our table and reflect on the surprise in store for us. His very bright red nose twitched. Was it the thought of the Senegalese and the *Fusiliers Marins* who were ready and awaiting the signal that made it twitch? Perhaps it was the fun of watching Tacla all unconscious of what was to befall him in a few hours. The same may have been true of large, bland, smiling Chataigneau though he denied later any knowledge of what was afoot; but I doubt if their wives were enjoying the joke. Madame Helleu's stately manner was strained, the mask of her make-up threatened to crack, and Madame Chataigneau was quite incomprehensibly

vivacious. Habitually so *distracte* that she seemed not to hear what one said and answered—if she spoke at all—with a remark that made no sort of sense, on this particular evening she made such an unusual effort to be agreeable that I grew more and more uneasy as the evening wore on.

Selim Tacla and gentle Renée his wife were I knew unhappy. They were our friends. B. had a high opinion of Tacla, and I had grown very fond of her. She was a frail little thing, sensitive, intelligent and unassuming. They would both have preferred perhaps not to come. But it was right that he should be there. If the Lebanese government was really a government then some member of that government should be present when we entertained royalty, and Monsieur Tacla could afford to ignore the French insult to his government in this house that was a bit of England. He was doing so very successfully. His fine square face was tranquil, his manner composed. Indeed we were all pretending very adequately that nothing had happened, the room looked nice with all the many candles lighted in the crystal candelabra, King Peter was talking away quite happily and little Helleu was busily drinking champagne with the great ghostly presence of General de Gaulle looming behind him to give him courage.

What had happened had been a series of moves on the part of the Lebanese to achieve the independence that had been promised them and a series of countermoves on the part of the French to checkmate them. The opening had been the elections. General Catroux had been called to Algiers before they took place and had left Monsieur Helleu to see them through. The result had been a great shock to the French and a serious blow to their prestige. For the elections had been free, the great issue had been national independence and an end to French influence as against a treaty with the French and a return to a modified form of the old mandatory system, and the result had been an overwhelming victory for the Nationalist parties both in Syria and the Lebanon.

What made this the more humiliating to the French was the fact that they had taken very energetic measures to influence the elections and had failed. General Catroux had decreed that the voting should be free and by secret ballot, but Monsieur Helleu and his henchman Boegner had not been content to abide by the spirit of this decision. The pro-French clergy had been mobilized, and the *sûreté* agents had been sent out through the country a week before the election to persuade, threaten and bribe the electors. Rumor was that the French had spent fifty million francs on the campaign; this naturally enough was denied and a story was told in the villages that the British Minister had been seen riding through the mountains on a white horse carrying bags of gold. But what the French could not deny was the

fact that their agents had spent the week before the election inciting the people to vote for the French candidates, on polling day had managed to exclude by force in many places, the "watchers" of the Nationalist party and had tampered with the ballot boxes. The result in Jebeil, a district to the north of Beirut where Emile Eddé was influential, had been laughable. There were thirty-seven hundred voters in Jebeil and thirty-seven hundred votes had been cast, a 100-per-cent poll with a 90-per-cent pro-French majority. And yet, in spite of these efforts, the French party had failed.

The French had been, to put it mildly, very stupid. In their eagerness to sway the election they had thrown off all disguise and come out openly against the sovereign rights of the people. And then, realizing in the middle of the campaign what they had done, they had endeavored to confuse the issue by calling the National candidates the British candidates. But again, though the result had evil consequences, they were not what the French expected. The educated classes knew quite well that the British were backing no candidates and interfering in no way with the elections, those among the ignorant villagers who believed that their National candidates were protected by the British did not resent the fact, but they did, on the contrary, identify the British as never before with their own national ambitions.

The part played by the British in this struggle had been a very plain one. There were British troops everywhere in the country and their presence had given the people courage to vote as they wished. That was all. But the French in their discomfiture could not believe it. How could they believe that this to them weak inferior little race whom they despised would dare to defy them? How could they admit to themselves that they were detested by a large majority of the people even in the Christian Lebanon and their presence in the country resented? They couldn't. They do not acknowledge the unpalatable truth to this day. In '43 they chose to believe that the British were at the back of it all, that all this ferment over independence was a deep British scheme and the British Minister, Major General Sir Edward Spears, the biggest schemer of the lot.

We shall see how carefully this idea was cultivated, and how it grew into a legend welcomed with enthusiasm by the French Assembly in Paris in May, 1945. The idea may have been a comfort to the *Grand Sérail* of Beirut in '43, it may have been a sop to their pride; it didn't get them out of their difficulties. The new Chamber must meet and elect a new President and a new government must be formed, in both countries.

It is the tradition in the Lebanon that the President should be a Christian, the Prime Minister a Moslem, and the various portfolios divided among the Christians, Moslems and Druses so that all three religious faiths should be

fairly represented. The tradition was followed; Bechara Khoury, a Maronite, was elected President, Read Sohl, a Moslem, became Prime Minister, Selim Tacla, of the Greek Orthodox Church, Foreign Secretary, and so on. Read Sohl had been sent repeatedly into exile by the French and was well known for his anti-French sentiments, but Tacla was a no less ardent patriot. Indeed it began to look as if these men of different religious faiths, citizens of a country where religion had been such a disruptive influence for so long, represented a people united at last by a powerful sentiment, patriotism.

It was this government and the recently elected Chamber of Deputies who had precipitated the crisis that so disturbed our dinner party on November 10. For on the eighth they had voted unanimously to modify their constitution without French approval. The vote had been understood as, and indeed was, a gesture of defiance but it had surprised no one. Boegner and Monsieur Helleu had foreseen what was going to happen. They had known since the election that the new Chamber was going to be troublesome and Helleu had gone to Algiers the beginning of November presumably to consult the National Committee. He had then sent a telegram from Cairo asking Read Sohl to postpone the sitting of the Chamber until his return, but the Chamber had met, the deputies had voted and Helleu had returned on the ninth to find that the decision to modify the constitution was about to be published in the local press. He, or perhaps it was Boegner, had then acted with decision. Every newspaper office in Beirut was invaded on the afternoon of the tenth by the *sûreté*, and the newspapers were confiscated. At the same time the invitation to the Lebanese government to attend the military review on the eleventh was withdrawn. The crisis was on as we sat down to dinner.

## II

An interminable evening. B. took Monsieur Helleu off to what we called the green drawing room when the men joined the ladies, and remained closeted with him for what seemed hours. I was left to look after the King and our other guests in the pink drawing room, with Tony, Hamish and Francis to help me. It wasn't easy and it grew no easier as the night wore on. Madame Helleu sat upright and talked a great deal. Madame Chataigneau was vivacious in spasms, Renée Tacla drooped on her chair. I listened with difficulty to the young King's boyish chatter. The servants brought drinks, Tony passed orangeade to the ladies; Hamish took whisky to the men. Francis poked up the fire, threw on more logs; Tacla's face was a document of patient suffering. Monsieur Chataigneau smiled a great many large smiles. Madame Helleu talked about Shakespeare's plays and Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Tony unfolded his long legs and wandered into the great hall that separated us from the green drawing room. It was after midnight. I began to feel very fatigued and signaled to Hamish for a cigarette. He came to my side, gave me a light.

"What," I asked under my breath, "is B. doing? Is he still closeted with the Ambassador?"

"No. They are outside in the hall. They've joined the three Yugoslavs."

"You couldn't, I suppose—"

He looked distressed. "I'm afraid not, Lady Spears."

It was one o'clock when B. and the Ambassador rejoined us and at one-thirty our royal guest at last gave the signal to go.

B. and I accompanied him down to the front hall. Francis offered him a pen and he wrote his name in the guest book. The others did so each in turn, excepting Monsieur and Madame Chataigneau. We noticed afterwards that the Chataigneaus had not written their names. When they had all gone save the two secretaries B. said:

"Well, I'm greatly relieved. Helleu has given me his word of honor that he will do nothing likely to disturb the peace."

The party from the *Résidence des Pins* must have reached home shortly before two in the morning, the Taclas a little later. At three-thirty Tacla's house was invaded by a company of *Fusiliers Marins*, he was arrested and carried off. The same thing was happening to the President of the republic and other members of the Lebanese government in their several homes. The *Fusiliers Marins* dealt with Tacla and Camille Chamoun; Senegalese, commanded by French officers, dealt with the President and the Prime Minister. In Tripoli other troops had arrested Deputy Abdul Hamid Karami. By four in the morning the President and all the government with the exception of Abou Chala, Minister of Justice, who couldn't be found, and the Druse Minister of War had been seized and carried off to Rachaya, an ancient fortress in the mountains.

My bedroom adjoined the green drawing room, there was a glass door between with a curtain across it, and I woke as it seemed to me in the middle of the night to see a light shining through the curtain. "What a bore," I thought, "the servants have forgotten to turn out the lights. Shall I get up? No, I'm too sleepy. What does it matter?" But I did get up and there was B. in his room getting into his clothes. It was five o'clock.

"What has happened?"

"The President has been arrested and taken off to the mountains. It was done with the greatest brutality. Young Bechara Khoury came to tell me. He is in the drawing room."

"I'd better get dressed."

"Yes, I've sent for Dan and have put in a call for Dick Casey. You might ring Robin, will you, while I'm dressing? Just ask for the duty officer at the mission, and he'll put you through."

I took up the phone by his bed. B. went on talking. "Colonel Isham is coming down from IXth Army; there'll be others; we'll want breakfast—coffee anyhow."

Robin's voice was sleepy when I got through to him.

"I'm calling for the general, Robin. There's trouble. He'd like you to come round as quickly as possible."

"Right. Give me ten minutes to get on some clothes."

B. was putting on his shoes. "According to young Khoury all the government has been arrested. At the President's the Senegalese arrived armed with loaded revolvers and fixed bayonets, disarmed the Lebanese guard, broke down the front door and burst into the daughter's room. She's thirteen—she was asleep. They tore her mosquito net down with their bayonets and demanded where her father was. He was in bed of course. He and his wife share a room. They hauled him out of bed, watched him while he got dressed, gave him no time to pack a bag, and hustled him down the front steps. They had seized young Khoury and locked him in the guardroom, calling him 'son of a dog,' 'son of an Englishman,' but one of them let him out as the President was being hustled down the outside stairs. 'Let him see the cad,' was the pleasant remark. Then they took him off to the sûreté who let him go and he came straight here."

B. tied his shoelaces and got up. "The boy fell into my mosquito net in the dark. I couldn't think what it was. Then I turned on the light. There was blood on his face." He hurried out.

It was morning so I opened the shutters, had a quick bath and got dressed. Bechara Khoury isn't a strong man. He is heavy and rather feeble physically. The thought of him in the hands of black troops wasn't pleasant.

By seven o'clock the house was like a railway station; officers from IXth Army and the Spears Mission, bishops of the Maronite Church and the Greek Orthodox, Deputies, press—not the French press of course—only the Arabic. No Frenchmen darkened our doors that day. Dan was there by six. Robin soon after. George Wadsworth, American Minister, was among the earliest. Wadir, our excellent butler, had organized breakfast by six-thirty in the dining room. Coffee, bread and butter, eggs—but not many took time to sit down to it, so we carried coffee through to Mr. Wadsworth, who was writing a dispatch in one room, to Dan taking down Haliel's story in another. The Archbishop of Beirut, Monseigneur Khoury, marched in at seven-thirty

to say, "I have come in the name of all the Christians in the Lebanon to demand British armed intervention." Then the Grand Mufti came, then Abou Chala and Emir Arslan, the two Ministers who had not been arrested—very excited they were—so were most people. Secretaries were running back and forth summoning B. or Dan or Robin to the telephone. Cairo came through, then Jerusalem and Damascus, then Cairo again, and every now and then there would be a roar of bombers flying over the house.

Zelfa Chamoun walked quietly in soon after seven, very smart in white linen, her fair hair smooth, her sweet mouth faintly outlined with lipstick; she looked charming, as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Have they got Camille?"

"Oh yes." She gave a little laugh. "The *Fusiliers Marins* were with us at three but the officer was quite nice about it. He told Camille to pack warm clothes for a long stay in a cold climate. I only came to ask the general's advice. Can I see him?"

"Of course. There he is in the corner with Mr. Wadsworth."

B. had caught sight of the pretty creature and came forward.

"I came to ask you," she said to him, "if I should call out the people of the mountain—they are all armed and ready—or if I should wait."

B. was I think even in the midst of the turmoil a little taken aback by this, but he didn't hesitate.

"Wait, Zelfa. My advice to you is to do nothing."

"All right," she said, and went away, walking lightly, as she had come.

I didn't hear what had happened at Read Sohl's until later. They live in the Moslem quarter, some distance away; and no one came to tell us perhaps because there was no one left in the flat but the Prime Minister's young wife and his mother and his four little girls and the servants. It was only next day that Madame Sohl went to B.'s office to ask him to intervene. She is a strict Moslem and comes of a good family, the Jabris. They are big landowners in Aleppo and I believe very wealthy; swells in fact in the Arab world. Madame Sohl never goes out unveiled and never receives her husband's friends. But she hired a carriage and drove with her mother-in-law to the mission. Lifting her veil when she was shown into B.'s office, she told him in broken French how black troops had burst into her bedroom and found her in bed with her husband. There was a French officer with them and when Sohl had been dragged off to prison he had ordered her to unlock all her cupboards, and the troops had searched the flat. Madame Sohl is young and pretty with a round fair face, an Anglo-Saxon type. She told her story with anger, her cheeks flushed, while the old lady, who can speak only Arabic and Turkish, sat patiently watching B.'s face and nodding her heavy head. B.

says that he reassured them as best he could and conducted them down the many stairs to their carriage. There was a corporal at a desk on each landing and officers were hurrying up and down. When Madame Sohl came out of B.'s office and saw the corporal she made a quick movement to lower her veil, then tossed it back again and walked unveiled down the stairs. It was a compliment to the British and a sign of confidence that cost her an effort.

The Jesuits made libidinous fun of the whole affair, in a scurrilous French paper that appeared that evening. I was told on good authority that the article had been written by a French priest. It was difficult to understand why the *Grand Sérail* allowed such rubbish to be printed. The story of how a high-born Moslem lady's bedroom was invaded by black troops under the command of a French officer was not likely to raise their prestige in the Moslem world.

We turned on the radio at eight o'clock and heard a voice oozing with malignant venom. It was Monsieur Helleu announcing that he had abrogated the Lebanese constitution, dismissed the Chamber, arrested the government and appointed Emile Eddé as head of the Lebanese State.

### III

It occurred to me half an hour later that Madame Bechara Khoury must be very unhappy and that it would be a kindness to go and see her. I caught B. coming out of his study and asked him what he thought. "A very good idea. Go by all means."

The Becharas' house was only a few hundred yards down the hill from ours, but he told me to go in his car and asked Francis to see that his flags were on it. They would be a protection, he said, if there was trouble in the streets. There was no trouble that morning; the news hadn't yet got about the town; I could have walked quite easily; but I was glad to have Corporal Stephenson, B.'s devoted and reliable driver, with me, for as we turned the President's corner a truck came rushing down the street full of *Fusiliers Marins* with machine guns trained on the street and they looked unpleasantly excited as they dashed past.

There was no crowd in front of the President's house, only a small group of men and women standing quietly by the gate. The gate is on the street, and inside the gate a path leads to two flights of stone steps that curve up to the front door. The living rooms are all on the first floor as in many Lebanese houses, high above the court and the garden. Behind the house and overlooking it are the Senegalese barracks and I noticed as I walked up



the path that there were *tirailleurs* on the roof of the barracks with rifles, but nothing happened and I went up the steps.

Haliel came down then to meet me and took me through the hall that was full of people, very quiet and frightened, into a sitting room where his mother was surrounded by her relations. She came forward and took both my hands and held them tight while she tried to speak, but at first she couldn't. It wasn't until the servant brought coffee that she could tell me about the morning, and while we sat there, people kept peeping at us through the door and I heard voices saying, "It's Lady Spears. Look. Lady Spears has come," as if my coming was something wonderful.

I stayed, I suppose, about half an hour and when I got up to go, she was very much moved and they all clustered round, so pathetically, asking if I could only bring some assurance that the President wouldn't be harmed, that I said I would come again next day and bring any news there was.

I had forgotten what importance the people of the East attach to visits, but I thought of this as I went home and of the difference between these sheltered women and my girls away off in the desert. Well, if my small friendly gesture meant so much to them, why should I not repeat it? There was nothing I could do at home. I might call perhaps on Renée Tacla, and Zelfa. And that is how it came about that I spent the ten days of the crisis going to see my Lebanese friends and brought down on myself by so doing some of the hatred that the French were pouring out on my husband. For General de Lavallade and his troops didn't like my driving through the streets, flying the British flag.

The streets were theirs. They had cleared them, they had captured them, they had driven the women and children off them with their machine guns; even the disdainful camels disappeared. And they patrolled the pleasant winding ways with their flowering gardens in great trucks full of armed black men, and if a crowd gathered anywhere, in the Place des Canons or the Place de l'Etoile or outside the Spears Mission, they fired into the crowd and if there were children about and they got shot or crushed under the wheels of tanks, *Tant pis*, it was their fault and they were *canaille* anyhow, dogs to be run over, as a French general put it to me long after. *Des chiens à écraser* ("Lebanese dogs") was a favorite phrase with the French I met in the Levant.

But the women of Beirut were too much for them, the gentle, timid women who belonged to the veiled East after all rather than to the blatant West. Frail little Evelyn Bustros came out, holding her white head high, and marched behind Zelfa Chamoun and Klodagh Tabet across the Place des Canons and down the Rue Clemenceau to the Spears Mission, and Najala

Zemeddine, who is a Druse, and Addoura Beyhoum and Jenna Najar, who are Moslems, and Anna Tabet of course and Renée Tacla inevitably and her mother and many others from the aristocratic Sursock quarter, who had looked to France as the pattern of all culture for so long. They started from Zelfa's house, a small group, away the other side of the town and as they passed down the streets other groups joined them; and then women who saw them from the windows came running down, and there were many Moslems among them; Moslems, Druses, Christians, Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, even Presbyterians—Zelfa and Klodagh are Presbyterians—they were all out that day, and they numbered hundreds when they reached the Place des Canons and the gendarmes couldn't stop them and the gallant troops who had captured the town dared not shoot them down. They made their way to the British and the American Ministers and to the consuls of Egypt and Turkey and Irak and to the house of the Grand Mufti. They went three times on three different days through the town to ask that their cause be put fairly before the governments of these countries; and the gendarmes hustled them and tried to bar the way, but when the French ordered the gendarmes to turn the water hoses on them the gendarmes refused—so only the students (mostly from the American University) were shot down and some friends of the President's wife when they went to see her and some children.

One small boy was shot dead in the Place des Canons because he was pulling down a photograph of General de Gaulle, and some children were crushed by French tanks in Tripoli and others were killed and wounded at Sidon, I saw them afterwards in the British hospital—a little girl died who had been shot through the stomach—but there were not many dead. The total casualties among the Lebanese I believe were eighty dead and wounded. It was not, you observe, a big affair, our crisis, it didn't compare with what happened in Syria two years later. And if Emile Eddé, the ten-day Quisling drove through the streets with a tank and an armed lorry and armed motorcyclists as escort, it seems excessive by way of protection. But what interests me most as I think of those days is the behavior of the women. For they surprised me. Not Zelfa and Klodagh. I would have expected them to be tough. They were made of the same stuff as Dorea and Barbara and T. W. But Renée and the little old lady, Evelyn Bustros and the others from the quartier Sursock, they were essentially timid women, sensitive and very modest, who shrank from publicity. It cost them something to go out into the streets and make a public spectacle of themselves. Nor could they know that the black troops bearing down on them in their great trucks wouldn't shoot. You may say they achieved nothing, that the governments of the great

powers took no notice, that even at G.H.Q. Cairo they were considered a nuisance or perhaps a joke. Who can tell? I know they achieved one thing and I believe that although the first fine frenzy has dwindled it will last. They achieved national unity, they brought to birth a united spirit, and I do not think it will be easy to snuff it out.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### I

THE crisis lasted ten days. At the end of ten days the French were obliged to give in, bring back their prisoners from the mountains and reinstate the government. The Lebanese people had defeated General de Gaulle, but neither De Gaulle in Algiers, nor General Chadebeck de Lavallade, in command of the troops in the Levant, nor even the reasonable French officers with whom I have been able to discuss the matter since, can bring themselves to believe this; they prefer to believe that they were defeated by the British Minister.

I like the truth. I like to get at it and I like to tell it. I have stuck to it in this narrative and I mean to tell it now in so far as I am able. Not the whole truth of the Lebanese crisis, for I don't know it. I didn't see the telegrams, was never shown any secret dispatches. B. was very strict about this. If we were alone of an evening he would come home from his office with a bag full of official papers and would deal with them after dinner while I read a book or fiddled with the wireless. Sometimes he would look up over his spectacles and say, "Would you like to see this?" and hand me a folder marked "Most Secret" and it would be a résumé of the radio news for the past fortnight.

And if I did know all about everything, how could I or anyone assess the part he played in the shaping of the fate of the Lebanon? Its future is linked now with the whole Arab world, but it is not yet sealed. The people of that small beautiful country are not free from interference in their home affairs. They have acquired a part of their sovereign rights but the French are still clinging to their privileged position in the land. Messrs. Helleu, Boegner, Baelen and De Lavallade are gone. There was a great French house cleaning after the affair of November '43 but other officials came in their place. General Bénét took possession of the *Résidence des Pins*, Count Ostrorogue became very busy at the *Grand Sérail*, and the troops? Well, the local troops have been handed over at last, but the French troops have not yet gone. Indeed other and more French units were landed in Beirut Harbor in 1945 with what results the C. in C. Middle East knows only too well. It was in

Damascus this time that trouble arose, such serious trouble that a British armored division had to come up from Egypt, and the French Army in Syria had to be escorted out of the country under British protection. France nevertheless is still hoping to regain her lost prestige in the Levant. General de Gaulle is a powerful man and very tenacious. He resigned the other day and disclaimed further responsibility for his country but he achieved a part of his purpose and had time before he left office to tell the French people that they had won the war. There was a great day in Paris when he walked down the Champs Elysées with the British Prime Minister amid cheering throngs, all cinema audiences will know how wonderful it was, but no one knows what they said to each other. It seems hardly possible that they should have mentioned, on such an occasion, the affairs of the little Levant States, or that tiresome question of a treaty between them and the French, and yet there is an understanding of some sort between Great Britain and France concerning these countries; and we seem to have come to it without consulting them. Why not? In London you hear people say, "France is a great country; she proved a broken reed in '39 and has been greatly weakened since by the German occupation, but we must lean on her all the same. The Lebanon is small and of no consequence. The Arabs? Who cares for the Arabs?" But the Arabs of Syria and the Lebanon have not yet given in. B. and I assisted at the beginning only of a struggle that is still going on and for which he is still being held accountable by the French and some of those who call themselves the friends of the French.

It is true that he championed the people of the Lebanon against the French in the crisis of November '43. It is true that in Syria, as in the Lebanon, their leaders and many simple obscure people came to him for help and advice, and he did help them and his advice always was to keep quiet, refrain from violence, have confidence that the British government would stand by its guarantee. That after all was the crux of the business. He was acting for England. He was upholding the justice of the Arab cause, not for their sakes but for our own. The prestige of Great Britain and her good name throughout the Arab world was at stake. If there are those in Whitehall who think this is of little consequence, it didn't appear so to the men on the spot. For the British Minister in the Lebanon there was no choice, nor was there any dissenting voice that I know of anywhere among the high British officials in the Middle East. Cairo, Jerusalem, Baghdad and Teheran were all of one mind. The French in Beirut had precipitated a crisis that left no excuse for hesitation. The British Minister in Beirut happened to be a man of great determination, capable of making quick

decisions, and incapable of asking himself whether or not he would get into trouble for doing his duty; he acted instantly with energy and decision.

They said, afterwards, the people of the country, that he had saved them, that had he not been there, the government would not have been reinstated, but I believe that he saved the French from the worst consequences of their own folly and the Levant from much bloodshed. And in my own mind, I am persuaded that his greatest achievement was to have convinced the French, before it was too late, that they must give way.

Not the French in the Levant. They had quite lost their heads. It was useless to attempt to reason with Helleu or De Lavallade or the saturnine Boegner. We never had a squeak out of Helleu after his broadcast on the morning of the eleventh. The impression was that he had gone into hiding with a bottle of whisky. De Lavallade, who seemed to have acted in the belief that the French were alone in the Lebanon, did keep in touch with IXth Army when he found the British were interested in what was going on, but he was a singularly obtuse and humorless man. Had he had a sense of humor, he wouldn't have placed two baby tanks at the end of the tramway that led to the racecourse and the French Residency, nor have given Emile Eddé such a formidable escort of tanks, armed trucks and motorcyclists to take him to his office in the *Petit Sérail*. Very few of the people in the town were armed, they made no attempt to attack any French barracks or residence. They closed their shops and went on strike. Large crowds gathered in the public squares to be dispersed by the machine guns of the *Fusiliers Marins*. Men and boys in the crowd tore down some pictures of General de Gaulle and set fire to a number of French trucks and armored cars; that was the sum of their violence, unless one counts as violence the action of the young women who forced their way through the cordon of gendarmes when they marched to the Spears Mission in a deputation.

General de Lavallade would answer to this perhaps that the mob would have attacked the French barracks had it not been for the measures he took to prevent them; that a display of force was necessary. But neither Helleu nor De Lavallade nor Emile Eddé would seem to have been in danger of their lives from Zelfa Chamoun and Klodagh Tabet and little Madame Bustros. Nor was it the impressiveness of French military might that kept the crowds within bounds. It was, as I remember, a posse of British mounted police walking their horses through the town who restored quiet when the shouting grew too loud; and it was almost all shouting. Had the Druses come down from the mountains the affair might have taken a different turn, but they didn't. They threatened to do so more than once during the ten days. Again and again word would reach the British Legation that they were about to

move. Once I remember a messenger came at three in the afternoon to say that the Druses were marching on Beirut at five. Each time B. was able to stop them. They accepted his advice and refrained from action, the bloodshed of 1925 was not repeated and that of 1945 in Damascus, which was coming, was averted for the time being.

No, the French representatives in the Levant were not reasonable men. But they were after all only agents of the Defense Committee in Algiers. Monsieur Helleu had received his instructions and had made a sad mess of trying to carry them out, but the fact that he was acting on instructions received was clear. Though an effort was made by Algiers later to disclaim responsibility there was little doubt as to where the responsibility lay. Indeed the miserable little man on the spot had made great play on the eleventh with a telegram approving his conduct from General de Gaulle, he waved it before the eyes of the press like a banner. There were even some who said afterwards that the whole affair had been a struggle between two strong men, De Gaulle and the British Minister in Beirut. That is as may be. No one could deny that these two who had once worked hand in hand together were now arraigned as opponents. With De Gaulle determined to set his foot on the neck of the Levant regardless of all promises of independence, and Spears equally determined that his country should not break its word, there was no denying that a battle was joined. One or the other had to give in and a liaison officer had to be found so that Algiers and Beirut could talk to one another. Algiers meant the Committee of National Defense with De Gaulle and Giraud as joint heads, but it was already De Gaulle in reality, and General Catroux was the man chosen to represent him. Beirut meant the British Minister to the Levant States and the Minister of State in the Middle East; so Cairo took a hand. B. had telephoned Dick Casey at once on the morning of the eleventh. He arrived the next day, stayed twenty-four hours, then General Catroux turned up and went back to report to his obstinate chief. Then they both were with us again. There was a great deal of coming and going during that brief ten days. Many conferences took place in B.'s study behind closed doors. I didn't hear what was said. I would watch the cars draw up from the drawing room window, see Dan arrive with arms full of papers, and Hutchins perhaps or Tony or Hamish or Colonel Furlong from the consulate. Then the guard would present arms and Francis would run down the steps and General Catroux would get out of his car and take the salute, and his slight weary figure would disappear into the house, and I would be left to twiddle my thumbs until at three perhaps B. and Dick would be ready for lunch; or if it was evening, we would sit down to dinner with luck by ten, and Dick would tell me something, possibly, of

what had transpired and I would try to piece together from the fragments of their talk how things were going.

So my story of our little crisis is not the whole story, it is only my own very scrappy view of the happenings. I will tell it briefly as I wrote it down at the time in my diary.

## II

11 P.M. November 11th, '43. The town quiet this morning but some disorder in the streets later. All shops were closed, all civil telephones cut off. The consulate is completely isolated, even their military line, and all newspapers have been seized save the two controlled by the French.

Went to see Zelfa Chamoun this afternoon. Her house was thronged. She and Klodagh very quiet but getting impatient. Klodagh said, "It seems to us about time to call out our people. The general wants us to keep quiet, but we feel we've had about enough." A man rushed in just then very pale and breathless to say that there had been shooting at the President's house and that the outside stairs were streaming with blood. This caused such consternation and excitement that I thought I'd better go and see if it was true. Found it was so. Blood had trickled down both sides of the double stairway and along the path to the gate. A large crowd had gathered since my morning visit, not violent, rather scared. There were shouts of "*Vive l'Angleterre*," "*Vive le Général Spears*," as I went in, and much applause. Very embarrassing. Madame Bechara was evidently frightened. Emile Eddé had passed with his armed escort, and the troops in the lorry had fired on the crowd. Then the Senegalese stationed on the roof of the barracks overlooking the house had joined in and begun firing at the front door and the windows. Three Lebanese had been wounded at the top of the steps and one Frenchman killed. As the Lebanese *gendarmérie* have all been disarmed Madame Bechara cannot appeal to them for protection. The French are the only people who could give protection and it is the French who are doing the shooting.

I asked her if she would like a British guard for the night or would she prefer to come to us. She said she would do whatever the general thought best. Went to the office to consult B. who said a British guard was impossible but by all means to take her and the children for the night. So I went back and brought them here.

November 12th. Four children were shot today on their way to school, by Senegalese. I believe they threw stones. Radio Levant (Beirut station) gives an official denial by the French that they have employed any colored



troops. Civil telephones still not working. All classes at the American University have been suspended.

The Bechara family have gone home.

Bombers continue to fly low over the town and Sholto Douglas has sent a message that these Blenheims were not given to the French for the purpose of terrifying the population and that if this happens again he will cut off supplies.

Forgot to mention that the whole town is plastered with photographs of Stalin and De Gaulle, the two heads side by side as if taken together. They are separate photographs but are pasted on the walls and hoardings as if each pair was one of two buddies posing together before the camera. They were put up all over the town during the night of the arrests.

Went to Zelfa again today and Renée. They all ask me for news and I have none. I go to see Madame Bechara Khoury every day as she is very anxious about the President. I ask B. each morning what I can say to reassure her. He always says the same thing. "Tell her not to worry, that they won't harm the President and it is going to be all right."

13th. French troops fired on a deputation of students outside the Spears Mission this morning wounding six. B. was out when it happened.

14th. Dick Casey arrived yesterday at four and left at noon today. He had interviews with a number of people including the Grand Mufti and the archbishop. He is backing B. up to the hilt and I gather from what they let drop that London is reacting strongly for once. Interesting to note how jealous Casey, the Australian, is for the good name of Great Britain. Winston himself couldn't be more enraged at the suggestion that we should condone the monstrous behavior of our allies, not that anyone has suggested such a thing.

Have just heard that De Lavallade is in Cairo and has declared at a press conference that everything is under control here, order established, Beirut perfectly quiet, that there have been no casualties and has repeated that the French have employed no black troops at any time!

15th. Called on Madame Read Sohl this afternoon in the Moslem quarter. A fringe of people on both sides of the street clapped when they saw the Union Jack on the car and gathered, it seemed, round the door, after I went in. Howells was driving and a lance corporal of the British military police had been given me as escort. Madame Sohl's flat is on the second floor. My lance corporal came up with me, closing the iron door in the street after us. The rooms were full of women and children, only one man, the Iraqi Minister. Madame Sohl introduced her mother-in-law, her sister, her four little girls—the oldest is nine the youngest two—and took

me through the crowd of women to an inner drawing room behind glass doors. The lance corporal waited outside the flat on the landing. We had been sitting for about five minutes when shooting began in the street and he rushed in saying, "Don't be alarmed, my lady, it's only some French troops in lorries, firing at the crowd."

"But why, Corporal? What troops?"

"I don't know, my lady, but there seem to be five lorry loads. There's a French officer with them—a major."

Panic among the women and children. Some of the children started to cry. I said I had better go, that I was so sorry if I was the cause of this. But Madame Sohl said I must stay for coffee, and as the sound of firing had stopped, I stayed another ten minutes and drank my coffee to the muffled sobs and whimpering of children. Very worried at the idea that people might have been killed or hurt because of me, but furious to think that the French were trying to drive me off the streets. There were three tanks drawn up across the street on the left of the entrance when I went down. A French officer with four stripes was standing a little way off opposite the door and a cordon of black troops was holding the crowd back at a distance of about a hundred yards. Howells was waiting, he'd been sitting quietly in the car all this time.

I asked him if he was all right. He said, "Quite all right, my lady. The only thing that worried me was that the people came rushing to the car when the firing started, they swarmed all over it."

"Why did they do that?"

"For protection, because of the flags." He nodded toward the two small Union Jacks. "I thought they'd break the springs of the car."

"Well, we'll go home now, please."

The French officer with the four stripes kept his distance while this was going on, the crowd was watching, perfectly quiet, behind the cordon of troops. Howells pointed in his direction. "He has given me orders," Howells said, "not to drive back the way we came, but to take the Rue Bastia because it is guarded by French troops."

I said, "Nonsense. I won't be told by any French officer what street I am to take. We'll go back the way we came."

The tanks were supposed to barricade the road but they weren't staggered, there was room to pass, so we slipped past their noses and drove home as we had come. It appears that the officer in question had offered five Syrian pounds each to some boys in the crowd (street urchins) if they would throw stones and spit at me when I came out. They refused the money. The oldest of the group has been to the mission with Klodagh

and signed a written statement to this effect and Howells said when B. questioned him that he had seen the Frenchman offering the boys money but hadn't known what it was for. The purpose of the maneuver is obvious. If the little creatures had spat at me and thrown stones the crowd would have gone for them, the Senegalese would have intervened, there would have been a fine mess and De Lavallade would have complained that I had caused a riot.

Final episode of the day was what looked like an attempt on B.'s life tonight just outside this house. He was on his way home, the car was held up by a French airman who brandished a loaded revolver through the window. If he meant to shoot he didn't have time. B.'s military policeman was very quick, disarmed the man—the gun had five rounds—and marched him off to police headquarters.

November 17th. Fighting has broken out in the mountains. The French sent troops and tanks to arrest the two Lebanese Ministers who are still at liberty in the Druse country and they defended themselves.

General Catroux arrived yesterday and moved into the house next door to Donna Maria, in the *quartier Sursock*. Why not the *Résidence des Pins*? It looks like a snub of Helleu. He, Catroux, is downstairs at this moment.

18th. Catroux wouldn't budge. He was taken aback it seems when B. asked to see the prisoners, then refused saying, "Unless I am allowed to arrange this matter in my own way General de Gaulle will withdraw all his people from the Lebanon." Not a very powerful threat since a great many would welcome such a move as the best possible solution, but neither Catroux nor De Gaulle seem able to understand how detested their people are in the country, nor can they believe that we are not trying to drive them out. Robin Hutchins tells me that De Gaulle complained to him last year in London about the Spears Mission, saying that it was usurping the functions of the *Grand Sérail*. Robin had been appointed as head of our military section, had been taken to see De Gaulle before leaving for Beirut and instead of a formal interview had been treated to an angry harangue. What business, De Gaulle asked, had the British to guarantee the independence of the Levant States? And when Robin answered, "I thought we had conquered the country together," De Gaulle replied, "That has nothing to do with the question. It is we the French who have given them their freedom, and it is for us alone to judge when they are fit to receive it."

Dick is coming back tomorrow to meet Catroux. The feeling here is that if the French don't give in and let the government out of prison

there will be the kind of trouble that cannot be quelled by a posse of British mounted police. The Damascus government has remained aloof up till now, but it can't do so much longer, and Iraq, Egypt and Trans-Jordan are all watching.

The one good thing is that we now have some troops in the country. The Rifle Brigade has come up from Egypt and other units, even some Shermans. They are camped outside on the golf course and along the shore. Beirut is out of bounds to British troops, except for the guard on this house and the mission, but the people know they are here.

Very pleasant I must admit to have two British soldiers on guard with tommy guns at our front door instead of the usual Palestinian Arab in his sentry box. Great comfort when the Rifle Brigade took over, even though those rosy-cheeked boys tramp over the flower beds and make a mess of the garden. They can do what they like, bless their hearts, just so long as I hear their young cockney voices outside my window. I suppose I've been under more of a strain than I thought, or I wouldn't have felt choky at the sight of their smart green berets when they came marching in.

Saturday 20th. Long meeting downstairs in B.'s study between Catroux, Dick Casey and B. I am supposed to know nothing about what transpired and I don't know much. B. is very cagey indeed, but I can't help forming my own impressions, and they are that De Gaulle is obstinate, Catroux playing for time and the local French in a very ugly mood indeed, so ugly that they have turned on Catroux for carrying on any negotiations whatever, or even consenting to discuss the matter with us. Their attitude only bears out what I felt about them when we first came two years ago. Peace in this country is vital to us because of the war but it is of no importance to them since they are not interested in the war, only in French prestige and their own pleasant billets. Men like Montclar would like nothing better than to see the whole of the Levant go up in flames. They are spoiling for a fight here. They would love to let their guns loose on this town. That we should stand in their way maddens them.

Sunday, 21st. Catroux came again yesterday morning. The interview I gather was more hopeful. Catroux has been visiting all sections of the community, Maronite Patriarch, Grand Mufti etc., and seems to be impressed by the strong feeling in the country. He looks dead-beat and very depressed. Perhaps he knows by now that the French must give way.

The latest French propaganda brought by a gossip from Algiers is that

General Spears is no longer in office, "*ne signe plus son courrier*," and that the army commander has taken over.

Am told by another of my spies that Colonel Oliva-Roget came over from Damascus to see the Ministers in their mountain fortress and begged them weeping to save the prestige of "La France," and save them, the French, from IXth Army.

What a man! When we lunched with him a year ago in Suedia he talked to me of nothing but his mother, who is in France, how he missed her. He is old and I should think a dyspeptic and a neurasthenic with an Oedipus complex.

November 22nd. Very trying day yesterday. Spent almost all day alone and took several baths. A lot of coming and going downstairs, servants very excited as they'd seen ammunition being issued to our riflemen in the back yard. Lieutenant Easten, who is in command of our guard and is staying in the house, seemed to think something was going to happen, then all orders were canceled. B. very nervy, so I fear things are going wrong. This can only mean that the F.O. is getting cold feet, as the people here, the Lebanese, are standing firm and are keeping quiet. They are keeping quiet because they count on H.M.G. and on B. to see things through, for no other reason. If B. by any chance were obliged to let them down, he would of course resign. And then what? But I can't believe it will come to that.

### III

November 22nd. All over. The President and the Ministers are back; the government is reinstated; Emile Eddé they say has fled to the mountains. Very noisy morning. Shooting, shouting and singing came up from the direction of the President's house but B. didn't want me to go out so I didn't learn until lunchtime that it was all by way of rejoicing.

Visited Madame Bechara Khoury at four. A dense crowd blocked the street but the gendarmes made way for the car when they saw the flags. House packed, but I was taken through to Madame B. K., who said she would never forget what I had done for them all. I admire her. She has shown great steadfastness of purpose. She was really afraid they would kill Bechara, but told me repeatedly during these days that she would rather anything than he should give in and consent to a compromise. There was a possible compromise it seems on the basis of a French offer to release the Ministers but not reinstate the government. None would accept.

They weren't brutalized in their fortress but it can't have been very

pleasant locked up in a room with windows painted over so they couldn't see out. The only news of what was happening they got from the servants who cooked and served their meals. Camille makes a joke of it all but is boiling. Karami had the worst of it as they hit him with the butt end of a rifle, didn't give him time when they arrested him to get dressed or collect his teeth and he left them behind in Tripoli. Poor Karami. He is a grand old chap, looks like an Irishman. I can see him with his white hair in disorder, arriving at the mountain prison in pajamas.

These people are so much more like us than anyone in England imagines. Their Arabic names make them seem strange to those who don't know them. Now I feel that I do know many of them and I find that they have the same emotional reactions, the same ideas about decency that I have. I understand them in fact better than I understand most Britishers. They are gay, spontaneous, sensitive and quick, where the British are solemn, phlegmatic and have their sensibility under such control that they are about as vibrant as blocks of wood.

It is all over, but our troubles and theirs have only begun.

The local French have learned nothing. They cannot admit that they have brought all this on themselves by their own folly. So they blame B. for everything. To say that it was all Spears's doing is too easy, it lets them out too beautifully at the moment, but it is bound to make trouble for them in the future.

One thing seems certain, they will never forgive B. and it appears that they are nearly as bitter about Catroux. He is probably the only Frenchman in the country who has arrived at a fair estimate of the situation and understood that for his people there were only two alternatives, give in or clear out, lock, stock and barrel. He chose to give in, and having made his choice he has taken pains to let it be clearly known. There is no ambiguity about it. The surrender is complete. He has published a statement undertaking that all powers shall be handed to the local government on a progressive plan, including the control of the troops on a basis to be negotiated.

This is good, and it was necessary, but he is not happy about it. How can he be? He has handled a very disagreeable job with great ability, has saved a remnant of French prestige and will receive no thanks from De Gaulle, while his compatriots on the spot declare that he has sold the pass.

November 23rd. B. came in just now to say that Catroux had sent a message warning him that there was a plot among some of the French here to bump them both off.

Incredible as it seems, they are already talking at the *Grand Sérail*

about a treaty, the famous treaty that was the issue in the elections. The poor old President has scarcely had time to embrace his children, the Ministers have only been home for twenty-four hours and their jailers suggest that they should now sign a treaty recognizing their privileged position in the country.

November 29th. A general purge has followed the return of the government. Helleu, Boegner, Baelen and Gautier have gone. De Lavallade is going.

What is to come of it all? This is a backwater now. The war has moved away. All the big issues are being decided elsewhere. No one at home is interested in the Arabs. B. will get no thanks, whatever happens, for what he has done here?—and the French of course, here and in Algiers, are out for his blood.

Does it matter? Does he mind? No, not really. But he did love France, and when France went back on us, there was De Gaulle and the Free French, but now De Gaulle has done this and there is no one.

#### IV

A question had been nagging at my mind for some days. I could avoid it no longer. It demanded an answer. What was I going to do about the hospital? I had equipped the hospital and given it to the Free French. It seemed at the moment a very strange thing to have done, but I had done it and I was still its honorary head. It bore my name—or more exactly, the name of the British Minister in Beirut. Could I go on with it? Did I want to? Wouldn't it be better to sever my connection with the French forces?

If I did, what became of the girls and the F.A.U. boys? The boys might carry on with the colonel, so would some of the girls perhaps. One couldn't tell what they would do. On the other hand the colonel might not want to keep them. Many of the old members had gone, but Bidy, Rachel and Iris had come out at my request, as had Jocelyn. And what of Dorea? I hadn't seen her for nearly three years, but she was there, holding down the London end, staunch, steady as a rock, she had just sent out two new nurses. She believed in the unit, so did half a million people in America. Leslie Benson sent them bulletins. The Hadfield-Spears Hospital was becoming a legend. . . .

I was wretched. I worried and argued it out with myself day after day.

How could I go on working for the French? The French as I had come to know them in the Levant weren't worth it. And they hated us. Our friends left us in no doubt about it. They were carrying on a whispering

campaign against my husband. The whispers said that De Gaulle had asked for his recall, that he had already been recalled, that his successor was on the way out, that the Spears Mission was about to close down. All the gossips of Beirut were buzzing with malicious rumor. As for myself, when a friend pointed out at the *Grand Sérail* that I might have been shot the day they sent a military force to lay siege to Madame Read Sohl's house, the answer was that it would have been a very good thing if Lady Spears had been killed.

I went for a walk and thought about this. One Frenchman, perhaps several, wished me dead. More than a few were out for B.'s blood, and De Gaulle was most certainly among them. But I was head of a unit in the Free French forces. It didn't make sense.

Then a letter came from Colonel Vernier asking me when I meant to rejoin them. All was well, but they missed me. Mike was a great help, but the new nurses were making things difficult for Jean. They complained that they had come out to go to the front and were nowhere near the front since it had moved to Italy. He had explained that he couldn't arrange the war to suit them, but he felt the need of my support. He quite understood that my husband needed me and that I had many duties but he hoped the general would allow me to come. There had been some gossip about the events in Beirut but he had put a stop to it. He knew that the general was a true friend of France, and sent him his *hommages*.

I took B. the letter and put him my problem.

"What shall I do, B.?"

"Stick to it of course."

"You mean go back as if nothing had happened?"

"Certainly."

"But the French are so horrid here. I do so despise them."

"You always said the fighting troops were quite different from this lot."

"They are."

"Well then?" He was annoyed. He hates indecision.

"But De Gaulle? How can I go on working for De Gaulle?"

"You aren't doing it for him. Your hospital wasn't a personal gift to De Gaulle. It's your contribution to the war effort. And the war is still on."

"But it is you I'm thinking of." I suppose I looked what I felt, miserably undecided, for he grew angry and spoke with emphasis.

"What De Gaulle thinks of me and what I think of him has nothing to do with the hospital. You can't let down those girls, and you can't let down Colonel Vernier."

"They could get on quite well without me."



"That's possible, but if you severed your connection with the unit because of what has happened here, they would suffer for it. Make no mistake about that." He frowned, seemed plunged suddenly deep in thought but when he looked up, he spoke lightly as if with a certain disdain for all these complications. "It would be *très peu élégant*," he said, "to *plaquer* the Free French Division, just now. After all, I was instrumental in forming it."

## CHAPTER XXV

### I

I FOUND them in Hamamet, on the shore of the Bay of Tunis, but it wasn't until the beginning of February '44 that I was able to join them. The war had moved off but there were still several thousand British troops in hospital in the Levant. There were Xmas parcels to do, I was president of the British Red Cross for Syria and the Lebanon, I'd been put on the IXth Army's United Services Welfare Council and become responsible for all welfare that had to do with service women. A.T.S., W.A.A.F.'s, W.R.E.N.'s were coming to Beirut on leave in increasing numbers. Great holiday camps had sprung up along the shore, my service women's clubs were overflowing, there was much to do. Without Mary Dodge and my delightful Red Cross director, Maureen Gibson, and our excellent band of local workers, I could never have got through with it. Then the Spears clinic in the far north of Syria began to have trouble with the French authorities again. A French military doctor had swooped down suddenly on our little hospital in Tel Tamar and had taken possession. The boys wrote in despair. A campaign had been begun among the Bedouins and the Kurds against Sheirajan, our excellent surgeon. They said in the villages that he had murdered one of his patients. Our political officer had to take a hand, Colonel d'Essesars who had succeeded Brosset at Deir-ez-Zor, was called in. It was all very distressing. Then B. and I received a shattering blow. The Caseys were leaving Cairo. Dick was going as governor general to Bengal.

I have said little about the Caseys and almost nothing about our very brief visits to Cairo. Their friendship is a private thing and this narrative is not meant to deal with my private life. They will remain a part of it I hope long after I have written finis at the end of this manuscript. Long, lanky, elegant Dick will come breezing in, from Bengal or Australia, with little Maie striding beside him, and he will blink through his thick tangled eyelashes and Maie will say, "Hullo darling"—and it will be as if we had never been separated. But Dick had been more to us than a warmhearted friend. I know few men as clear-sighted and with an equal integrity; he had

given B. his wholehearted support in all his difficulties, so his going was a double blow.

He went to London in January for discussions on his new job. It was Margaret Gilruth who rang up this time to say that Mrs. Casey was in bed with malaria, the children Jane and Don had flu and she had had it too, would I come? Margaret is a person of great charm, ability and independence. She walks lightly through the world with laughter on her lips. She walked into my life, then walked away, but she will come back one day. Jane and Don adored her. Jane was thirteen and Don was nine. They had been left behind by their parents in Washington, had been retrieved a year later, brought to Egypt and now they were off to India. And "Miz," Don would say if he were poking his snub nose over my shoulder. "Gee, you mustn't forget Miz." Don was very American and almost too much for Maie; Miz was the dachs.

I remember one of the telegrams that kept arriving addressed to Dick from Calcutta. I don't recall the exact wording but it was more or less this:

PLEASE LET ME KNOW THE SIZE OF YOUR PARTY. HOW MANY SECRETARIES AND SERVANTS WILL BE ACCOMPANYING YOU. STOP. YOUR BEDROOM AND SITTING ROOM ARE AIR-CONDITIONED BUT NOT YOUR WIFE'S SITTING ROOM. STOP. DO YOU WISH ME TO PUT THIS IN HAND. And more to the same effect.

Maie laughed. "There's only us," she said. "Dick and Don and Jane and Miz and me." But she shook her head as she looked with me at the photographs of Government House. "Not my cup of tea at all."

She recovered from her bout of malaria. The house filled with packing cases and boxes. We sat by the fire in the evening recalling rather wistfully the high spots of the past two years.

We were too busy during the last days to be miserable. All Maie's friends wanted to see her. Amy and Walter Smart, Terance and Sophie Shone, Alexander Kirk, Russell Pasha and Dorothea. Barbara Freyberg was gone. We both loved her, but she was already in Italy.

Then General Montgomery came for the week end, suddenly, from Sicily. He had come for a rest and he sat all day Sunday in the garden. "Isn't he a darling?" Maie said. "So cozy."

He showed me the new ribbon of the Africa Star. "The yellow is the color of my car," he said. "I matched it." He wasn't enthusiastic when I told him I was with the French. "There are only two nations that can fight the Germans—the British and the Americans."

The departure of the Casey family at six on that winter morning remains vivid in my memory. It was dark, and cold in the houseboat on the Nile where their friends had foregathered to say good-by. Dick came hurrying in, his face harassed, his hands full of passports. Maie followed, very chic, with a ridiculous hat tilted over one eye. Jane was wide-eyed; Don, slung all over with helmet, haversack, kodak, air-gun, had Miz in his arms.

Alexander Kirk drove me away when they had disappeared across the shadowy water and he had heard the Sunderland pass into the sky. Alexander is a very fastidious man. He has a caustic tongue and does not tolerate bores or vulgarians. He said, as we drove away, "Two more virginal people—" His eyes were red. Then he added, "All the fun has gone out of life in Cairo." It was true for me.

## II

The weather was bad all the way to Tunis. Storms of rain. Many airfields flooded. I traveled in a D.C. 3. We had to come down at Castel Benito and I spent the night in Benghazi at the Officers' Club. My room had four walls but the corridor outside ended in the open air. Even the tragic harbor seemed sordid. When we reached Tunis next day I saw Biddy Pattison waving from the other side of a lake and we had to be carried across it from the Dakota in a truck.

It wasn't a happy visit. The unit had struck a bad patch. There was no Barbara now to hold them all together. M.T.C. and nurses were arranged against each other, with Jean being ground between the two groups, and there were three strange French girls whom I had never heard of before.

The colonel was obviously uncomfortable when he presented them. They belonged, he said, to a blood transfusion unit that was momentarily disbanded; they were only with us as guests. The colonel was not himself. He was jumpy, evasive and rather cross when I said the hospital looked shabby. It was installed in a derelict hotel of indescribable dinginess. Most of the windows and doors had been used for firewood by the Germans. General de Lattre de Tassigny had come, Jean told me, on a tour of inspection and had not been pleased. He had said he expected something very different, remembering St. Jean le Bassel. I was chagrined but not surprised. Our material was wearing out; our linen was going gray; the blue blankets were faded and stained.

The patients were happy enough but the nurses seemed to be very nervy and cross. The girls and boys, like the officers, were quartered in a group of white villas. Pretty Moorish villas, delightful in design, but derelict like the

hospital. Mine they called the Eggshell, because it was tiny and white with a round dome. It was close to the shore. A cactus hedge divided the garden from the sands and the gray stormy winter sea.

The bad weather seemed to have invaded our mess. The girls were messing now by themselves, the officers in another building, and feeling was running high on the subject of rations. Jean warned me. There were two camps, nurses on one side, M.T.C. on the other. They had voted and the M.T.C. had had it, they had stuck to French rations, and the nurses were, they declared, starving. British rations included porridge and orange marmalade, French rations neither porridge nor marmalade, but wine and coffee. Not realizing how serious the matter was I brought up the subject at supper and let loose the storm.

"But we voted. We agreed to have the same food as the officers."

"I didn't vote, I wasn't here."

"And I've made them marmalade." Jocelyn's voice was shrill. "I bought the oranges and scrounged the sugar."

"I brought back four loaves of American bread last week, you know I did." Rachel's eyes were like a tiger's.

"You say so—but I've never seen any."

"How can we be expected to do a full morning's work with nothing in our stomachs but black coffee and dry black bread?"

"Not even margarine to put on it."

"The boys have porridge and jam."

"Yes, and bacon. I've seen it."

I went in search of Michael. "The food situation, Michael, is serious."

"I know."

"It's a question of porridge mostly."

"They are welcome to ours. We can't eat it. It's almost entirely made of straw."

"What's to be done? It isn't only the food. Everything seems to be rather horrid. Why has the colonel put the hospital in that dilapidated building? Why not in our own nice tents?"

"There's no room for the tents in Hamamet."

"And we need new sheets, coverlets, jugs, basins. Jean tells me all the ward equipment is wearing out. Edith says she only has one hypodermic syringe, Evelyn says—"

"The trouble is," Michael explained, "that we now depend on Algiers for everything and Algiers has nothing to give us. The British Army has washed its hands of us and the Americans haven't taken us over."

It was all very depressing. Mary Hawkins and Margaret Stevens, the two

new nurses Dorea had sent out, asked to see me. Hawkins did the talking; she said they were bitterly disappointed. They thought they were going to the front and here they were stuck in this awful place with only sick men to look after. And why should Jean Barr be head sister? She had had far less experience than most of them. Then Evelyn came, then Edith, then Franco. My days were one long series of difficult interviews.

And what, they asked, did these French girls think they were good for? I hadn't asked for them, had I? Why had the colonel taken them on without referring to me?

I wasn't too happy myself about that. The colonel had explained that they were only with us temporarily *en subsistance*. Was a principle involved? Should I insist on my right to recruit the *personnel féminin* and send them away? I didn't see how I could if they were only visitors, and they seemed nice girls. Françoise was charming; Antoinette rather silly perhaps, Marie just a plump little thing. I consulted Jean. They didn't worry her, she said. Jean is a humorous person, it takes a lot to get her down. I had been watching her with the nurses. She remained serene and sweet-tempered, too sweet-tempered if anything. She didn't complain but I knew it was our own lot that worried her.

"You must be tough, Jean. They are all getting out of hand. Not less discipline, but more. You have my complete backing."

But the officers too were at sixes and sevens. Thibaut came to me mysteriously, after dark, in my Eggshell. He told me while the sea roared beyond the cactus hedge that the colonel wanted to turn the hospital from a mobile unit into a field hospital of four hundred beds on the American plan, and he and all the others were against it.

"But how can he? Our equipment," I said, "is inadequate as it is."

The colonel expected to get a complete American equipment. All the division was being equipped by the Americans. The colonel had been in Algiers about it. I must on no account let him know that he, Thibaut, had come to see me.

"But I must discuss it with him?"

"Certainly; but not as coming from me, or there will be an—'*histoire*.'"

I had had enough "*histoires*" since my arrival, but the future character of our formation was involved. I knew that with our present personnel of thirty-five British F.A.U. boys and ten nurses we could never cope with a hospital of four hundred beds. It would mean a large French staff, French nurses who would refuse to accept Jean's authority, French orderlies—and where were they to come from?

I sought out the colonel. He was all on fire with enthusiasm over his new

scheme. I had to tell him that I was against any such plan. He argued at some length. The division needed, he said, a large field hospital. We would not sacrifice our mobility. We could divide the formation into a light mobile section to go forward, and a second-line hospital. And the personnel? He was vague about the personnel. I realized in the end that the whole project was vague. He wasn't at all certain of getting the American equipment. We came to a compromise. I would go to Algiers and try to see the head of the American Supply Service and ask for equipment for two hundred beds.

It occurred to me in the luxurious French plane that carried me to Algiers, in company with General de Larminat, that I hadn't had time to worry over my feelings toward the Free French. The crisis in Beirut had happened in another world. Jean had given a cocktail party and asked a number of our old friends to meet me. De Robert had come and Commandant Simon and Lalande and Pierre Duro and a dozen others. None had shown any awareness of a horrid situation in the Levant, and I hadn't found it at all strange to be talking to them about old times and their next move to Italy. They were friends, I was glad to see them, it was taken for granted that the "Spirettes" would be with them in the Italian campaign, and De Larminat had been as usual courteous, cold, scathing in his criticisms, this time of the Americans, but with a faint, friendly, humorous gleam in his hard intelligent eye. I had lunched with him in his camp. Now he escorted me to Algiers where Duff and Diana Cooper had offered to put me up for two days.

### III

I knew almost nothing about Algiers and understood less. It seemed that General de Gaulle had established his pre-eminence over General Giraud in the French National Committee, but how he had done it I had no idea. Madame Catroux I reflected had not been asked after all to give General de Gaulle a room in her house. She was taking a mobile unit it appeared to Italy with Colonel Fruchaud as her *médecin chef*. It would be nice to see General Catroux again. I had last seen him in Beirut just after the crisis. He had been friendly, but very depressed, and with reason. I wondered how General de Gaulle had received him on his return. Not too badly it appeared. He was still governor of Algiers and co-ordinator of Moslem affairs for the French National Committee. But it was difficult to believe that De Gaulle would accept the affront offered him by the Lebanese. Catroux was a man of the world, he was big enough to recognize that B. had been right and his own people wrong in the Beirut affair. But De Gaulle was not a man of the world, he was a fanatic, and he was not big, in the sense of being generous, he was only

exalted, he might in fact almost be called petty—his resentment, for instance, of the work done by the Spears Mission in Syria. Well, I would have to learn as usual from Margot's indiscretions where the wind lay.

A car whirled me from the airfield up to Duff's house above the great cold glittering town. It was lunchtime. Diana in trousers (no stockings, she explained) with a colored handkerchief round her fair lovely hair greeted me with the words: "We've a lunch party of the right, May, today," and I found myself shaking hands with General Giraud and our old friend General Georges. There were two princesses as well, I remember, very frail, distinguished and *fin de siècle*, who fell on the large slabs of good English roast beef supplied by the British Navy, like famished wolves, but it was Giraud who interested me, and Georges, especially Georges. Giraud was interesting because he was blank. It is the only word I can use. Looking at him, talking to him, waiting for some small psychic wave from his personality, one drew blank. But Georges filled me with a welter of confused emotions. He was so glad to see me, so warm in his greeting, so eager to have news of my general and to talk with me alone. Could he come? Would I be at home next day, give him half an hour? I said yes, I would be delighted to see him and then I asked myself what I meant by it? Here was a man who had remained on in France under Pétain, he had been commander in chief of an army that had broken and fled, then laid down its arms. He recalled the harrowing scenes of the retreat, the flood of refugees pouring down the roads of France, the headlong senseless onrush of drunken soldiery. I looked into his square, sturdy, aging face and could feel no resentment, nothing but pity and regret.

He had difficulty next day in getting to see me. He was living in Algiers as a guest of General Giraud. He rang me up in despair. He had no car, no office, no one had given him my message fixing a time. He never received his messages. If he could find a car he would be with me in half an hour. He managed it in the end. He got to me somehow and talked to me with vehemence but in vague terms of the pass things had come to. I didn't understand all he said. I could only listen and feel sorry. I tried to remember how he happened to be in Algiers. Had it been Winston? Winston had met him through B. in the last war and had admired him and become a friend. One thing was plain—Georges was unhappy, he was finished and he knew it. I saw it in his ravaged face and tragic eyes. He might be against De Gaulle, he had never been against Great Britain and he could not have made friends with her enemies or come personally to terms with them; of that I was certain. That then would be the test—if I ever returned to France and met our old friends.

Duff said, when I gave him my painful impression of the interview, that



Georges might well be unhappy. He had been rash enough to distribute anti-Gaullist leaflets among the troops. It was a wonder that De Gaulle hadn't had him locked up.

I had a sense, as he spoke, of a formidable being, towering unseen in the background and mysteriously dominating the great North African city that was a part of metropolitan France; De Gaulle, a specter, the ghost of France, waiting to return, determined to return.

I didn't see him. He was ill, Duff said, and had gone away. I drove up to the white villa where he lived high on the mountain and left cards on his wife, more relieved than otherwise to find her out. Nor did I see General de Lattre. He too, Eve Curie told me, was ill in bed with flu. She came in to Diana's at cocktail time, very smart in uniform. She was on De Lattre's staff, and seemed friendly. And Madame de Larminat was just as she had been, gay, charmingly inconsequent and abrupt. And I sought out General Guérriac, the *médecin inspecteur* who had been in Beirut in the old days, and discussed the future of the unit and was taken next door to see Koenig, who greeted me with his special mixture of cordial friendliness and teasing mockery—and no one mentioned the affairs of the Levant until we dined with the Catroux'.

They lived almost next door to the Duff Coopers and Diana had taken a great fancy to Margot. She was, Diana said, the one live wire among the French women in Algiers and she particularly wanted me to meet Madame Bénèt, for General Bénèt was going to Beirut. He had been summoned from Washington and was to take Helleu's place.

Madame Catroux hurried forward across her lamplit drawing room as we came in. She called me Mary and kissed me, I think, and took me, I know, by the hand and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "Tell me, *ma chère*. Helleu was beneath contempt, wasn't he? I must talk to you alone. Georges has told me what a dreadful time you all had, but I want to hear more." I had my cue.

Madame Catroux's house was luxurious and beautifully warm. Diana's was icy. Her dinner was elaborate and was served by the Annamite boys I had first seen in Damascus. I don't remember the Siamese cats who had traveled with her from Indo-China but I am sure they were there. General Catroux was only a little less weary and his gaze a little less mournful than when we last met. He asked after my general and said he hoped we would like General Bénèt. His manner was easy and friendly. He turned to Diana and left me to General Vanier. I was delighted to see him again. He was Canadian diplomatic representative, it seemed, to the National Committee. I had last seen him on board the "Galatea" in St.-Jean-de-Luz Harbor. He had gone to

England with our Ambassador on the cruiser when we were transshipped to the "Etric." He was a friend of General Réquin's. We recalled those far-off days. Had he any news of Réquin? Yes, Réquin had retired, was living in Paris. How, I wondered, did one get news from Paris? I had thought France was cut off. But the princesses who had been at lunch at Diana's were going back, they had said, at the end of the winter. They appeared to travel back and forth quite easily. It was all very confusing.

I sat on a couch for a time after dinner with Madame Bénèt. She seemed very pleasant. Then Madame Catroux took me off into a corner. "Now tell me, Mary," she said, "all about that wretched Helleu." But it was she who told me, and by the time she had finished, I knew the form. The blame for all the trouble in Beirut was to be put on Helleu. He had committed a *gaffe* and was the scapegoat. The affair hadn't been serious, not at all. What had happened had been luckily of no great consequence, but Algiers was ashamed of the poor show their people had made in the Levant. I would find General and Madame Bénèt most agreeable, very different from the Helleus; and Algiers, that is to say the governor of Algiers, wished to remove from my mind any disagreeable impression that I might have received from men like Helleu or Boegner. It was all very interesting and Helleu's subsequent fate is interesting for he is not after all among the unemployed. It didn't seem wise apparently to dismiss him. There was that telegram; it was not, perhaps, the only paper in his possession that would throw light on the ill-fated action he had taken in Beirut. Second thoughts in high French quarters suggested that it would be best to insure his silence, so he was appointed after all to another post. But neither Madame Catroux nor I would have believed this possible at the time.

I saw Brigadier Loomis of the United States Army in charge of supplies, promised to send Diana a hot-water bottle from Cairo and flew back to Hamamet in a snowstorm, intrigued, relieved and amused by the friendliness I had found in Algiers.

If I had had any doubts as to what I should do about the unit, they were dispelled when I got back to Hamamet. Jean came to me, then Jocelyn, then Edith and Biddy and Rachel. It made such a difference, they said, to have me there. No one else could speak with the same authority. Then Michael came and begged me to reason with the colonel. He couldn't possibly undertake the work of a four-hundred-bed hospital.

"But it won't be that, Michael. The colonel has promised. We've compromised on two hundred."

"I'm afraid he'll change his mind once you've gone."

It seemed evident that I still had a function to perform in the unit. I

thrashed it all out again with the colonel at Carthage. We had a picnic at Carthage and discussed the future looking out across the ruins of the amphitheater and the Bay of Tunis to the distant mountains.

I didn't mention Thibaut's visit but I told him that Jean and Michael were both very worried. The worst of it was that Beirut was a long way off, and they would be putting an even greater distance between us when they crossed to Italy. I must be away I explained for some time but I would not fail to join him in Italy. I begged him meanwhile not to go beyond our agreed number of two hundred beds and he promised. Then I asked him bluntly what the feeling was among our own officers about the trouble in Beirut.

He dismissed the whole affair with a shrug of his shoulders. "Politics," he said with a snort. "We've nothing to do with politics. What matters to us is the war!"

"A pity," I said, "that your people in the Levant don't feel as you do."

He looked at me a moment in silence, his boyish eyes clouded, then dismissed the Levant with another shrug.

"We are going to miss you," they said, when it came to saying good-by, "and you are going to miss the best part of the war."

#### IV

It was the middle of June before I reached Italy. I came down on the airdrome outside Naples a week after D-Day. General Eisenhower with Montgomery in command of the XXIst Army Group had landed in Normandy, while in Italy Rome had been occupied and the Vth American and VIIIth British armies under General Alexander with the French between them had pushed on to the north and were nearing Siena.

The unit had crossed from Bizerta early in May—and had done their best job of the war. They had followed so close on the heels of the division that at St. Georgio even the colonel had felt it was rash. I had missed it all as they had foreseen. I didn't know where they were when I took off from Cairo. Keith Park, Air Marshal, Middle East, had said: "I can land you in Naples, but after that I can't help you and as there are four airdromes I don't see how your people can meet you. If there is no one you had better go to Caserta and as for—"

I had sent a wire to the colonel and another to Morse who was I knew in Naples, but it seemed unlikely that my messages would be received in time. All the way, huddled on my bench in the Dakota, I kept saying to myself, "Either I shall be stranded on the airdrome and not know what to

do, or T. W. by some miracle will be there to meet me as she has been a hundred times." And then we came down (it was half-past four), and as I stepped from the plane an American officer came forward and said, "Are you Lady Spears?" And when I said yes, he said, "Your car, Lady Spears, has just arrived." And there T. W. was, with "Marguerite," the old Chevrolet. The colonel had had my telegram at midnight, she had motored two hundred and fifty miles since breakfast against interminable convoys, and had made it in time.

"But how did you know which airfield to come to? Keith Park said—"

Her eyebrow expressed a certain scorn for the delightful air marshal. There was only one airfield for transport planes—everyone knew that—and there were only two roads up the backbone of Italy. She proposed to take me up Route 6 via Cassino. I'd better see Cassino. But she'd rather not start back till morning, if I didn't mind, Marguerite needed a bit of attention. Anthony Morse was sure to put us up for the night.

Did she know where to find him?

Of course. The eyebrow again. He was staff officer, western approaches. He would be at Navy House on the harbor. He lived in a palace farther out along the shore, but he would be in his office. I relaxed; it was evident that the Spirettes knew their way about Italy.

It would be nice to linger with Anthony Morse on his terrace looking over the Bay of Naples and watch the ships coming in with supplies for the armies that were steadily, surely pushing Kesselring back toward the Brenner. Morse is so vital, so invigorating, his eyes are so blue, he gave us such a warm affectionate welcome.

"Hello. How's the general? Let's go home. Master is coming for drinks. Do you see that?" pointing to the crowded harbor. "That from the point of view of tonnage is the biggest harbor now in the world—bigger than New York."

"Master" was Admiral Cunningham, C. in C. Mediterranean. He had commanded the expedition to Dakar, he was a friend of B.'s and admired De Gaulle. "De Gaulle showed himself a great man at Dakar," the admiral said, "in the way he took disappointment."

But I must push on up Route 6 through tragic Cassino, eloquent as Tobruk Harbor, and the other ravaged towns where the battle had passed, to our camp on Lake Bolsena with the tents by the shore full of wounded and nurses and drivers splashing gaily about through the mud in rubber boots, and the colonel bursting with pride. They had been in a bad way in Hamamet but the Italian campaign had put them right. It had been tough, it had been arduous in the extreme, it had been dangerous, and very exciting; they

had moved camp eight times in a month, every three days they had cleared out their patients, taken down their tents and moved forward to put them up and fill them again with new casualties. It had meant great effort, little or no sleep, a complete lack of comfort, and splendid teamwork; it was what they liked best and they were at the top of their form.

At St. Georgio they had been shelled. The colonel confessed rather shamefacedly that they were only three miles from the German lines and in an exposed position—so naturally the enemy had sent over some shells. There had been great excitement it seemed in the operating room for Thibaut had been in the middle of a big abdominal operation when the lights went out and Vernier had rushed in shouting, "Everyone on the floor." So Thibaut had had to finish his abdominal on the ground with the help of a hurricane lamp. "But it was all right," Jean said, in her sweet laughing way. "Biddy nearly stepped on the poor man's intestines, they were spread out on the floor, but he got on very well and was evacuated to Naples a fortnight ago. Come look at the holes in the tents." They were very proud of the rents in the canvas. No one had been wounded except Pat Aitken and his was, Rachel said with a snort, only a scratch, but Hajali the cook declared he had had a saucepan knocked out of his hand by a piece of shrapnel.

I spent a wonderful month with the unit in Italy. It took days to hear all their news. There had been two weddings. Biddy had married Major Rivers-Bulkley of the Scots Guards at brigade headquarters near Cassino the day they landed at Naples. Pamela Houghton had married Arnold Spiers, one of the F.A.U. boys. Biddy had spent her wedding night with her major at the transit hotels in Naples then had taken her place in the hospital convoy. Pam and Arnold were spending their honeymoon between the surgical wards, the operating room and their own small tent in the compound.

The colonel said, "By the end of the sixth year of the war the problem of married quarters in this unit will have become insoluble."

What did I think of Jean's face? Pat asked. It was all the colonel's doing. He had driven his jeep over the edge crossing a bridge on the road to Rome, the jeep was wrecked and Jean's funny nose badly skinned. Jean laughed, and went striding away through the mud in her rubber boots. A disreputable figure in her muddy trousers. What did she care, they all were disreputable when it rained, and it rained very hard. The camp for several days was a sea of mud. No one seemed to mind.

"I would rather like," I said, "to go to Rome."

"Come with me," Rachel cried. "Let me take you, Lady Spears. I know

where you can buy silk stockings and powder puffs and scent, real French scent."

"And gloves," Jocelyn put in, "quite cheap, and the most heavenly lingerie."

The ambulances meanwhile were rolling in at the gate, and the hospital beds were full. The legion took Radio Cafani a few days after my arrival and the wounded were in such high spirits that there was no keeping them in their beds. It was almost like Bir Hakim. Our three young captains, Thibaut, Cupigny and Guénan, were doing fine work and fat Dr. Albert was getting all the penicillin he wanted from the Americans; even Hawkins was radiant. She came to me one evening and said, "I want to tell you that I was quite wrong about Jean and about everything. I've never been so happy in my life."

It was very exhilarating. To be with the troops again was enough in itself, but to be this time with French troops who were approaching France was wonderful.

Madame Catroux, the colonel told us, was up in the mountains with her mobile unit. Fruchaud? No. Fruchaud had gone back to Syria. She had a new *médecin chef* and followed the Germans so closely that it was said she could be heard scolding them, night and day.

Could I go up to see her?

But certainly.

So T. W. and I chased Madame Catroux through the Piedmont hills and found her at last perched on top of a mountain within call, almost, of the enemy lines. The Germans had left that particular mountaintop that morning, she told us, she was just moving in. "Come," she said, "to my caravan and see how I live."

She was haggard and happy. The caravan was charming inside. The bed had a gay coverlet, there was a cupboard of pretty tea things. We sat and drank grapefruit juice looking out over the densely wooded Italian hills, then left her to put up her hospital beds in the abandoned schoolhouse near by. An intrepid woman. Where, I wondered, would I find her next time?

General Brosset came to lunch a day or two later, bringing the Comtesse de Luart. She too, it appeared, had a mobile unit in Italy and wanted to talk to me about the question of changing the names of our units. Madame Catroux's, mine and hers, were now called H.C.M. 1, 2 and 3. Mine, the Hadfield-Spears Unit, was H.C.M. 3. It had been done in Algiers. The excuse was, that the Americans refused to equip voluntary units. She was going to

protest to General Juin and wanted me to do the same. Why should our units lose their identity? I agreed with every word she said, and looked with envy at the handsome creature's golden hair and nylon stockings, then remembered that she had been in Paris for some time during the occupation—and afterwards in Algiers.

General Brosset had taken over command of the division and had been a good friend to the unit. It was he, Jocelyn said, who had insisted on bringing it to Italy. He ordered the Spirettes down to the shore of the lake after lunch to watch him swim. He was a magnificent swimmer and we watched him plunging through the waves with obedient admiration, then all clustered round him and were photographed. I never saw him again. He was doing his best all through the Italian campaign to be killed. I remember his gaiety that day at Bolsena, remember his shouting, "Where are the Spirettes? Jocelyn, Rachel, Biddy, T. W., where are you? Come down to the lake and see me swim." It is horrid to think that he was drowned in his jeep six months later.

There was less talk among our friends, I noticed, about the Moustachios. The 1st Free French Division still considered itself a cut above the others but it was clear to everyone that General Juin had done what Giraud had failed to do and that the North African divisions and the Free French divisions had been made into a single magnificent fighting force. Juin gave me lunch at his headquarters and wasted no time over the name of my unit. A very direct rugged little man with a piercing eye, he said I was perfectly right. My unit must keep its name and identity. I said that for the sake of convenience in drawing hospital supplies, I would be quite content to call the hospital H.C.M. 3 with "*Ambulance Hadfield-Spears*" in brackets, and he authorized me to do this. He then made a point of coming back with me after lunch to the hospital, to thank me formally in the presence of the patients for the services that the unit had rendered.

I liked General Juin. He was the type to inspire confidence. T. W., Rachel and I spent a night at VIIIth Army with General Oliver Leese in his camp overlooking Lake Trasimeno. He had nothing but praise for General Juin and his army. His two A.D.C.'s, Ian Calvaccaressi and David Butters, had arranged the visit. They had come out with us in the "Otranto." How long it seemed—well, it was three years and a bit since we had set sail from Glasgow. We spoke of it, sitting on the steps of my caravan high among the hills. "This is our special V.I.P.E.R.S. caravan," Ian said. "General Smuts slept here last night," but I was thinking of my band of steady British girls and of the long way they had come.

Orders came to break camp at the end of June and move south to prepare once more to go overseas. It could only mean France. When? How soon? Where would we land? Were we going all the way round to Normandy or was it true that General de Lattre was commanding an all-French expedition and would make a landing on the south coast?

Wild rumors ran through the camp. Each one had heard something. No one knew anything. We moved south in convoy with the division and traveling by night went into camp at Albanova, twenty miles north of Naples.

It was a pleasant camp. Our tents were set among tall lime trees. The corn in the fields had been gathered into golden sheaves. The girls brought baskets of ripe peaches each morning from a neighboring farm. The nights were soft and warm. I would lie awake with my tent flap wide open watching the moonlight drift through the treetops.

"You will stay and go with us to France. Stay! You must stay."

But I couldn't stay. B.'s time in Syria was growing short. Questions were being asked in Parliament about absent M.P.'s. He would have to go home soon now if he wanted to keep his seat in the House of Commons. I must go back to Beirut.

It was hard. I had come to know Bidy and Rachel and Iris as I had once got to know Dorea and Barbara and Rosie and Cynthia. T. W. was the only one left of the original drivers, Jean and Evelyn were the only two nurses who had been with me in France in '39, but the group, by some strange alchemy, was the same. The spirit of the Hadfield-Spears Unit, that special mixture of gallant toughness and ribald mirth and quarrelsome loyalty and high undaunted purpose was still going on and would prevail, I knew, to the end.

"I'll see you in France," I said, as I climbed once again into my plane.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### I

OUR last months in the Middle East unfold in my memory like a landscape veiled in drifting mist. They are tinged with melancholy but now and again the mist rolls away and a scene of great beauty shines out of the past. It is as if we were traveling again the road we knew so well between Beirut and Damascus, were climbing in a fog as we often did to the high pass over the Lebanon, then swinging down through the wintry drama of the mountains above the wide wonderful Bekaa. And I hold my breath as I used to do and clutch B.'s arm and whisper "Look," for the mist is lifted and the great gentle valley lies below us—a place of dreams, of utter peace, of unimaginable beauty. The emerald land far below is flowing softly, silently through space and time, the leaves of the tall poplars, pointing to the sky above the little village houses, are green and silver; a shepherd moves eternally beside us on the hill calling to his sheep; a camel caravan comes slowly up around the bend and beyond the swaying procession, far beyond across the limpid chasm, the mountains are folded one upon the other until Mount Hermon.

Then we plunge again through the grim gorge of the Anti-Lebanon. The rocks are sinister, their shapes are tortured, behind them the hills are crimson in the evening light. But it is fading, it will soon be dark and I am glad that the mist comes down, for I am frightened and unhappy.

Memory is a capricious faculty. I do not understand why, dipping into the past, mine selects one thing rather than another. There seems to be no reason behind its choice. It darts about among the shadows like a crazy thing; certainly the moments that I remember most vividly from those last days in the Levant are not what reasonable men would call the most important.

There was a day high in the mountains; nothing of any consequence occurred; but it shines as if enclosed in a lighted crystal globe. There was a moonlit night on our top roof in Damascus and I hear Saadullel Jabri talking softly with small chuckles of his life in exile. A trolley goes rattling down from Hamman in Trans-Jordan through the country Colonel Lawrence traveled with his Arab friends, and a vermilion temple is blazing in the sun

at the end of a black gorge that leads to the strange long-lost city of Petra; these are more vivid in my memory than the crowd of ragged, filthy, drunken ruffians who came in trucks, shouting for De Gaulle, and stormed the summer residence of General B  n  t to celebrate with him the liberation of Paris.

That great day was tawdry in the Lebanon. The news from France that should have echoed through the mountains like a trumpet blast had a sound as thin and shrill as a scream. It was Radio Levant screaming. "The citizens of Paris have driven out the Germans. Koenig is in command of the capital. Le Cl  rc and his armored division are marching in." The voice was trembling, screaming with excitement. Poor frenzied voice. It fell on ears that waited for a mention of the Allies, but there was none. Poor, smarting, humiliated exiles, this was their day and their great chance; they missed it. The town of Beirut and the whole country of the Lebanon would have joined with a good heart in their rejoicing had it been announced a little differently. As it was Beirut divided into camps and some said: "One cannot blame them. It means so much to them." But others asked: "Were there no British troops in Normandy? Nor Americans to march on Paris?" And people squabbled instead of cheering, and many shut their doors and stayed at home instead of going to the French reception.

A dreadful business. Nothing could have proved, as this proved, the feeling in the country. General B  n  t had to hire men to make a crowd outside his gate and shout "De Gaulle, De Gaulle," the twenty-fifth of August. He had to bring them up the mountain road to his residence in Aley and when they got there they rushed through the gate, invaded his house and stole the spoons and even the electric light bulbs in the garden, so there were no illuminations that night at the French Residency as had been planned.

I had gone to represent my husband, but also because of my unit that was advancing north from the south coast of France toward Lyons. I wanted to shake General B  n  t's hand and say, "At last Winston Churchill has shown that he means to keep the promise he made in June five years ago." But when I heard the drunken shouts and was caught on the stairs in the evil-smelling crowd (I couldn't have got through to Madame B  n  t if it hadn't been for B.'s military police corporal who forced a way), I was hot with shame and so sorry for her that I could only murmur and slip away. So now the glorious summer campaign that liberated most of France is all confused and soiled in my memory. I lived through it in the Lebanon, and it will always seem unreal like a picture stained and torn by jealous hands too quick to snatch and make of it a placard, a cheap showman's sign. And though I've crossed the lovely land of France since a dozen times, and saw the German posts beyond the broken bridge of Kiel near Strasbourg from a

high observation tower and drove through the dreadful disemboweled villages along the Rhine, with their entrails lying strewn in the mud, dead cows and horses flung down with babies' cots and broken toys and images of Christ, I cannot think of the liberation of Paris without remembering that horrid day at Aley.

I had been alone at Aley for several weeks, with Hamish MacKenzie to look after me. B. had gone to England in late July, almost immediately after my return from Italy, and had left me behind to hold the fort. Just what that was going to mean I didn't know but I soon found out. For no sooner was he gone than the government and its friends grew uneasy, and rumors began to circulate that he wasn't coming back. The rumors were annoying, the uneasiness in official Lebanese circles touching but disturbing. If the President and his Ministers began to worry the moment their friend the British Minister left for England, this was surely a sign of weakness. What hope had they of winning a long struggle for true independence if they depended so much on this one man? They had been valiant six months before under extreme provocation and they had achieved some of their sovereign rights as a result. They could stamp their own passports and collect their own customs duties, the French had grudgingly conceded these things, but they did not yet command their army. The troops in the Levant were still controlled and officered by the French, they were being used as a bargaining counter in the matter of a treaty. The Levant States, the *Grand Sérail* declared, should take over their own troops if and when they signed a treaty with the French but not before.

The women were very nervous. There was talk of plots, the French were up to something, I would see. They were working up the people. What people? The Alouitter round Latakia. General Montclar was at work among them. There was a man who said he was God, a cross between a brigand and a peasant, a trafficker in hashish, a thief and probably a murderer. I laughed but it was, they said, no laughing matter. I didn't understand. What I understood was that they were nervous and apprehensive.

They had formed a Women's League after November '43, uniting Moslems, Druses and Christians. I had been to some of their meetings. Madame Malik had translated the Arabic speeches for me and I had been impressed by their ardor and good sense, but now they seemed to be drawing apart again, seemed to be going back to their old fears and antagonisms. How disturbed they were, poor gentle creatures, how easily frightened by what seemed to me old imaginary bogeys, how prone to credit rumors. "Beware the Moslems. The Moslems are our enemies." "The Christians of the

Lebanon are in great danger from the Moslems." Again and again the note was sounded. And one day, at Alice Tueni's or perhaps it was at Linda Sursock's, they told me how a Christian had been murdered in the mountains by a band of Moslems and all the region round was terrified and the priest had sent to General Bénèt for protection.

It was exasperating. I would go in search of Zelfa Chamoun or Anna Tabet or Renée Tacla's mother, Madame Achou, she was grand.

"How can they believe such tales? If a Protestant is murdered in England by a Roman Catholic, or vice versa, the church doesn't get in a panic. Surely the fact that there is a Christian Prime Minister in Moslem Syria must prove to you that all this talk is nonsense." And they would answer, "But of course, we know it as well as you, and we know where these stories come from. We would be all right if the French would only leave us alone. But it has always been their policy to divide the country by religious faction. They are doing it now. They never stop. The teachers in their schools are telling the children that if the French go away the Moslems will murder us all in our beds."

"Are you sure of that? I can't believe they would talk such wicked rubbish."

"You don't understand. It is their plan. It always has been. If they can divide us and frighten us and if because we are frightened there is trouble, then they will say they must stay in the country to protect us. That is what we are afraid of—not the Moslems but the Moslems put up to it by the French. If the British go away—"

There it was again. "If the French go away, if the British go away—"

What was to be the end of it all, or was there to be no end in our lifetime? The British Army would most assuredly go when the war was over and peace established, even if all the country begged them to remain, and the French were most evidently determined to stay whatever the wishes of the people. The will of a small people appeared to have no hearing on such questions as their own future. "Zones of influence." "Privileged position." It was we the British who had recognized the privileged position of the French in the Levant.

I would go home tired and depressed, turn on the wireless and listen to the news from France, but all the reiterated rumors, the hurting, nagging, stinging whispers that my friends repeated to me interfered. The British were working to get the Levant for themselves, and Spears was the prime mover in the plot. His secret agents were at work all through the country. If they could get rid of Spears all would be well. I seemed to hear the

malicious gossip coming up the valley from Beirut like the buzzing of a swarm of bees.

Then Hamish would come in with letters or news from "the Minister"; all was well in London. He would be back by the beginning of September.

## II

Dear Hamish, what a comfort he was and what a delightful A.D.C., so cozy, so considerate, so loyal to his absent chief. And a fighter like a small fierce bulldog.

Our new councilor and chargé d'affaires wasn't a great comfort to me. He didn't appear to like the Lebanese nor indeed to care for me very much. A short thickset man with a keen but secretive eye. I daresay he was very able, I don't know, I seldom saw him. He had a tall wife with large red cheeks and a slightly foolish smile who made many demands on him. Some said she was charming, I never found out if it was true. She wasn't strong it seemed, for all her high color and sprightly manner and could not help me with my clubs or committees and was not interested in any war work. She never came down, I think, to Beirut that summer unless for some special official party, it was too hot, but waited in the hills for him to join her and take her with him to this function or that. I used to run into them sometimes at these affairs, but depended on Hamish to be my escort.

He would go down each morning early to the office and I would follow for there was much to do. We would meet or not for lunch. I would lunch perhaps with the Wadsworths or with Bayard and Mary Dodge. The Wadsworths were very good to me. We had our native land in common and much else. They are friends and were a great help during those weeks when the tongues of Beirut were so tiresomely busy with the affairs of my absent general. If the gossips grew too noisy, if the slings and arrows came too thick and fast from certain quarters I could go to them for refuge or to Bayard and Mary Dodge, sink down and relax in their house that was quiet and serene. It breathed peace and charity to all men, it was safe.

I had many talks with Bayard Dodge about the future of the Spears clinics. We must envisage, we agree, the end of the war and endeavor to establish them on a peacetime basis. The Bishop of Jerusalem might take over the clinic at Tel Tamar, the Church of England had always been concerned with the Assyrians of that region and a first-class Syrian doctor seemed willing to undertake the work at Latakia. It would be a pity if it all came to an end; but John Gough, who was now in charge of the five centers,

pointed out that the F.A.U. boys would be going home when the war was over.

The phrase kept coming up. Everyone was talking of the end of the war, everyone was restless. Ninth Army's Welfare Council was much concerned by such talk. We must be more active, not less, the army said as the war drew to a close. The most difficult period of all among the troops would follow the end of the fighting. They would demand to be shipped home, and it would take two years or three to get them back. The holiday camps on the beach would be needed more than ever. The same was true of my service women's clubs.

It was not an idle summer. People came to stay. Sir Kinahan Cornwallis turned up for a night on his way to fish in the Orontes, my delightful air marshal, Keith Park, sent me his sprightly wife and dropped down to pick her up and whisk her off to Teheran. Anne Brians came from Cairo and Paddy Leigh Fermor convalescing after his adventures in Crete. It was while they were with us that we had our perfect day. Nothing happened, but it shines, it is touched with magic. We only lunched on a high mountain, that was all, and sat in the sun looking out over the world. The mountains rolled away to the north and east and south, the very blue Mediterranean spread to the west. We could follow the line of the coast almost to Palestine. What was there about that day to make it relatively eternal? Succulent dishes richly spiced spread on a sunny table; they disappeared within us. Pin specials and old brandy followed; from a gramophone somewhere behind us time-worn sentimental tunes from the Paris boulevards floated out to mingle with our laughter in the shining rarefied air. We walked home down the mountain road in the golden afternoon and sat on the terrace at Aley talking of Greece and of Crete where Paddy and Billy Moss had captured a German general and kept him prisoner in a cave, and of France where I hoped to find the girls before the war ended, and presently the day passed softly away into the night and was gone.

If our life, Hamish's and mine, seemed trivial compared with the great events taking place in Europe it was at least busy and sociable. We dined out perpetually and when we weren't out had people in to dine with us on the terrace. Nor did I have to tell myself that all this had its own small value. I knew it was so, particularly among the Lebanese. For everywhere I went they would ask, "Is he coming back? Are you certain that he's coming back?" Or "They say the Spears Mission is closing down. Is it true?" Or "We hear De Gaulle is coming, that he is sending two new French divisions. Do you know? Have you heard? They say the French are going to re-estab-

lish the mandate, that your government has agreed, that the general has resigned, is only coming back to fetch you home."

Again and again I would reassure them. Yes, he was coming back. Yes, I was certain of it. Not to stay perhaps for very long. They knew, I reminded them, that soon he must go home. But not just yet. No, the Spears Mission wasn't closing. De Gaulle most certainly was not coming nor was he sending troops. How could he? His divisions were in France. As for the British government, they must not listen to such rumors. Our government had pledged its word, there was no question of the mandate. All that was finished. Had they no confidence in Great Britain? Did they believe that we were going back on our guarantee, were about to strike a bargain with the French and sell them out? Sometimes I would grow angry with these timid doubting people and tell them they ought to be ashamed of having so little faith in Britain and the British Minister. But the rumors still went on, and as the days passed into weeks they rose in a maddening crescendo.

I didn't ask their origin. I knew and didn't want to know. Our relations with the French in Beirut had been almost pleasant since the arrival of the Bénets. Madame Bénèt I had found charming, the general, if rather uncouth, quite agreeable. We had dined with them before B. left and they with us. We had dined with Count Ostrorogue and at the French Admiralty with Commandant and Madame Fatou. Madame Fatou to be sure had asked angrily when news came of the fighting in Normandy why the American and British armies had invaded France? Why couldn't they have landed in Belgium instead? But she was a nervous woman and her question had gone unanswered. I had pretended not to hear it. I pretended indeed to a continual deafness all that summer, though never had my hearing been so painfully acute.

And yet, I have forgotten now, or almost, why I was unhappy, what the stings were and the hurts or who caused them. One can forget what is best forgotten.

There was a tree, I remember, a giant eucalyptus at the mouth of the Valley of the Dogs; it stands uncannily still in the afternoon sun. What has that tree to do with the march of events or the fate of nations? Nothing? Something? I do not know. It stood immense and motionless above the river, its great smooth arms lifted up, but its long slender leaves bathed in sunlight drooping down, dreaming, a gentle giant wrapped in a dream.

There were other trees that seemed to speak of a world that was quite different from the world of men. Olive trees ages old with squat, gnarled, twisted trunks, palm trees solitary by the sea and groves of poplars with happy trembling leaves. And the water wheels of Hama are creaking in my

memory, all the strange proud mysterious town is filled with the sound of their labored turning, and far to the north there is a ghostly city in an empty plain, and a small boy is leading his flock of goats over the stones where Simeon Stylites once built himself a pillar and founded a church. But in the street called Straight in Damascus much business is going on, there is a great clatter of tongues and jangling of coins and the colors leap like flame from the shops and the riches of the street are loaded onto the backs of arrogant camels, who carry them indifferently away across the desert.

And now a trolley rattles down across the desert of Trans-Jordan; an absurd vehicle, like half of one of those trams they call open streetcars in the U.S.A., and Madame Bechara Khoury, tucked in behind B. and me, with her son Mimo and her daughter Huguette and John Stokes, our A.D.C., is laughing. We are all laughing as we go rattling and banging at what seems breakneck speed across the desert. But I am confusing the times and the seasons. It was early spring when we took the President's wife and children to Petra and very cold in the open trolley with only a canvas curtain to shield us from the wind. We are all bundled up in sheepskins, and slender Mimo is almost obliterated between his large mama and his very fat little sister. Captain Mimo, as B. called him affectionately, doesn't laugh, life is very serious for this sensitive boy of sixteen. He looks out across Trans-Jordan with round wondering eyes. There is no one to be seen, Mimo, anywhere, as far as the eye can reach. This is a silent, empty, happy land. Our escort, you remember, the soldier of the Arab Legion, said so. He told you Trans-Jordan was a happy country because they were allowed to govern themselves and had no foreigners to interfere with them and when you said, "But there is Mr. Kirkbride and General Glubb who commands your Legion," he answered, "Glubb Pasha is no foreigner, he is one of us," and I think you made a comparison in your thoughtful boy's mind between his country and your own.

But look, there is a drove of camels and one of them bars the way, he steps casually with that maddening, supercilious lift of the lip onto the line. We are going to run him down, help! Oh help! Your mother speaks quietly in Arabic to our worn and wrinkled driver, who smiles and brakes, checking our headlong speed, and approaching as gently as a rattling trolley can, we persuade the silly beast to lope off the track and let us pass.

We stop when we are hungry for the line is all our own. There is no other trolley, and no train will come along today or next day. So we can stop when and where we like and lift out the lunch baskets and sit on the ground beside the tram and eat. I say when we are hungry, but if we consulted Huguette only on that point, we would not go very far I am afraid across the plain.



It is her mother who must decide, and it is difficult to choose a place for one place is exactly like another, there is no shelter anywhere from the wind and sun. All the land is pale-brown sand and stone until far away on the skyline it shades into shimmering blue. But at last Huguette cannot bear it any longer so we stop.

We had promised Madame Khoury long before to take her and the children to Petra and at last it had been possible for B. to find the time to go. We had motored to Humam where we spent the night with Mrs. Kirkbride at the British Residency, but Clubb Pasha had done the honors as Mr. Kirkbride was away in England and it was Clubb who had arranged the trip. Petra, the Atlantis of the earth, hidden below the earth's surface, lost and forgotten, is surely one of the strangest places in the world, since you go down and down to find it at the bottom of a secret cañon behind a gate of black rock a thousand feet high and as narrow as a bedroom door. But I remember scarcely anything about it save the violent red of the rocky walls within and the pompous shallow temples cut into the face of the cliffs. Tombs, tier upon tier of empty tombs, ugly, forbidding, desolate reminders of the emptiness of death and man's futile vanity; it was the living land above that enthralled me, the open land that had been led into the ways of peace by two Englishmen and has now achieved its freedom.

And if in these pages I am to say good-by to the family of the Lebanese President, I should like to do it not at the official dinner they gave us later, but now as we rattled back along that tramline and stopping at a lonely station, a solitary stone house in a vast empty plain, drink scalding hot tea very sweet and strongly flavored with mint that is brought to us by the Arab stationmaster. For Huguette's round face is bubbling with a child's laughter and her mother is laughing too, she is happy and not frightened as she was in '43, and Captain Mimo is looking gravely, wistfully at the British Minister.

It is troubling to think that this boy and others like him hold the future of their country in their slender hands.

### III

B. returned early in September and I remember next an evening in Zebdani. It was Ramadan and we were dining with the President of Syria in his garden.

Zebdani is a summer resort in the Anti-Lebanon much frequented by the people of Damascus. Coming from Beirut you turn off to the left of the main road just before dipping down to the Barada and find the river again higher up. The little town is fresh and green with villas set among orchards

on the hill above the river. The President had two villas, both in the same garden, one for his wife and children, the other where he transacted official business. The table was set under a grape arbor and two of the children dined with us. We were a family party and we dined early for it was the Quwatlis' first meal of the day. Faris Khoury, the venerable Christian Prime Minister, and Saadullel Jabri, president of the Chamber, and Jamil Mardam Bey came in later for the President and his colleagues had grave matters to discuss with the British Minister. When they arrived Madame Quwatli and I withdrew with the children, but she sat at the head of her table during dinner with B. beside her, for he was a friend of her people and her husband trusted him. She had never before received, I think, a foreigner, indeed she seldom saw the President's colleagues, but it was Quwatli's wish that she should extend this courtesy to his British friend.

Madame Quwatli is a very handsome woman, tall, massive like her husband with a clear fair skin and fine gray eyes. She speaks neither French nor English but sitting at table in the shadowy garden, with a soft blue veil falling in folds round her broad shoulders, she was very beautiful and she would watch us as we talked and when Chukri translated she would laugh as happy women do who adore their husbands.

We withdrew, she and I, to her villa when the Ministers were announced. Coffee was brought to us on her veranda, and the little boy went off to bed but the daughter stayed with us to act as interpreter for she had been studying French at her school.

We sat together in the soft September night for a long time and Madame Quwatli told me through her daughter's lips the story of her marriage in exile and of the great house with many rooms in Damascus where she had spent her childhood. Every now and then a servant would emerge from the shadows with iced orangeade in tall glasses and we would sit in silence listening to the wind in the trees.

I wondered as I sat with her what was going on in the other villa. The burden of the talk between my husband and these Arab leaders would be undoubtedly, what it had been for the past year, a treaty with the French. How would they take the message that he brought from London? Would they still trust him, consider him a friend?

It was often said that no Englishman could make a friend of an Arab. It wasn't true. Lawrence had proved it to be a lie in 1914-1918. Kirkbride and Glubb were doing the same now in Trans-Jordan, and Cornwallis in Iraq, to say nothing of the younger men like Major Harvey and Captain Dearden who had found their way to the heart of Hama, the closed, the most conservative and fanatic city in all Syria. I had stayed with them, I had seen for

myself how it was in Hama, and Dearden had been to see me to ask if it was true that we were going home. "If your husband leaves," he said, "we may as well pack up." And now B. had come with bad news for Chukri Bey, that I knew. I could not help knowing, but if I knew anything, had learned anything, was quite convinced about one single thing, it was that Chukri loved and trusted him and I believed would always be the same, whatever happened.

Was it vital or not to Great Britain that these lands should be friendly? There had been a moment in July '42 when I had thought I would be cut off from Beirut and be forced to retreat with my girls down the Red Sea and get home if I ever did get home via India or Australia. Suppose the Arabs at that time had risen against us, and all the Middle East gone up in flames? Their friendliness had been no foregone conclusion in '39. The Syrian leaders had made no secret of their loss of faith in us after the last war and had often talked of the change in their attitude toward Great Britain since B. had been appointed Minister. Saadullel Jabri had talked very frankly that summer night when he and Jamil Mardam dined with us and we sat after dinner on our roof in the moonlight looking across the silvered rooftops and minarets of the city. They told how the prestige of Great Britain had fallen very low in the Middle East since Allenby had marched on Damascus in 1918 to drive out the Turks. There had been an Arab awakening after that, they said, under Feisal and we, the British, had played Feisal false for the sake of the French, to whom the Allies had given a mandate over what he, Feisal, had believed was a part of his kingdom. The Arabs of Syria were all of one mind, they told us, on this question and they had expressed themselves on the subject of the French mandate that night in no uncertain terms.

The French had exercised, they declared, their prerogatives as if a mandate carried with it no responsibility toward the people nor any obligation to teach them self-government but only an opportunity for gain and exploitation. They had established schools, it is true, for the teaching of the French language and French history and had encouraged the many sects of the Christian faith in the Lebanon. But they had created rich monopolies for their own people and taken the revenues of the states for themselves, and had chosen as their friends and tools in the country Moslems of ill repute known to be traffickers in drugs, and thieves and murderers. And they had crushed by force every effort of the people to obtain their just rights and sent every patriot to prison or into exile.

"And we were among them," Saadullel Jabri had said with his chuckling little laugh. "The President was Feisal's friend, and now the French want us to sign a treaty, but we will have no treaty with the French."

It was late when the men came to join us. The Ministers greeted Madame Quwatli with gentle formality. We talked a little, then said good night. The President and his three colleagues came with us through the garden. Their faces were inscrutable, B.'s was the same. If I asked him, as we drove away, what had been said during the long discussion he didn't answer, or if he did, I have forgotten his words, as I was supposed to do. And this is of no consequence. For the real answer only came eight months later when General Oliva-Roget, that melancholy man, suddenly one evening in May at exactly seven o'clock opened fire on the city of Damascus.

I heard the news in Beaulieu—I was in the south of France with the 1st Free French Division by that time—and B. heard it in London. It was Terence Shone who had to report the matter to London. He had succeeded B. as Minister to the Levant States by then, and it was the French who had to be confined to barracks this time to save them from being massacred by the Arabs. But we didn't know that anything of the sort was going to happen when we said good-by to our friends in the Levant. Even B. couldn't have foreseen to what lengths the French would go in their desire to force a treaty on the States.

#### IV

We spent the autumn of '44 very peacefully in Damascus until the dreadful day when we heard that Lord Moyne had been murdered. How beautiful it was. We would go for a walk with the dogs every day after lunch. The car would take us up the road that led to Homs and Hama, or circling the city wall with its crazy dwellings we would turn east along the river through the Guta, the wide spreading orchards of Damascus that are a miracle of beauty in the spring when the apricot trees are in bloom and the storks come through on their way to Europe. We would get out of the car by a stream and walk along the autumn paths under the walnut trees or through the olive groves. The leaves of the walnut trees were russet and bronze, but the plumes of the great poplars were gold like the sunlight that poured between the gnarled trunks of the olives. Then it would fade, a blue mist would creep over the land and the villagers would come in from the fields. Passing with their carts or their laden donkeys, the men would greet us with, "Mai Salami," or "God be with you," but the women would pull their veils closer, and hurry by. We would watch them moving softly away across the fields like ghosts in their pale pink and blue and mauve mantles of faded cotton.

"How beautiful it is," we said. "How peaceful," and I said what the girls

had said to me in France when we left St. Jean le Bassel. "We must come back. Promise to bring me back again."

Then one day B. was called from lunch to the telephone to be told that Lord Moyne had been shot outside his house in Cairo. His face was stricken when he came out of his study. They had been talking together only half an hour before. Moyne had seen Anthony Eden and was feeling particularly cheerful. He had told B. not to worry. All would yet be well in the Levant.

"One of our few real statesmen gone," B. said, "with Walter Moyne."

They gave us a great send-off in Beirut and Damascus. It wasn't easy for us to say good-by. There were many dinners and receptions, all our friends asked us in turn. Linda Sursock, and Alice Tueni and Anna Tabet and Maud Fajalla, and George and Norma Wadsworth and the Dodges. Our evening with Bayard and Mary Dodge is a special poignant memory because we were so gay and they gave us such charming presents, an old precious copy of the Koran for me, and to B. a year's subscription to the *New Yorker*, and then next day they heard that their younger son whom they hadn't seen for four years had been killed in France.

Mary held her working party all the same two days later, and when I went to say good-by to all these faithful workers who were still making dressings for our hospitals we talked of the boy who had fallen in battle and they came out to their front steps to wave good-by and stood smiling side by side as I drove away.

Crowded days, touching, gratifying, sometimes harrowing. B. was made honorary citizen of both Beirut and Damascus. In the latter, the government gave a great reception and a dinner of three hundred people. It was held in the municipal buildings, and the President attended in defiance of all the rules of protocol. I sat beside him and he told me that only twice before had a dinner been given in these buildings to a foreigner. Once for Feisal, once for Allenby, now the third time for General Spears.

I cannot remember all the functions. I know B. spoke to the Chamber of Deputies in Beirut and that his good-by to the mission was very painful and that our house the morning we left reminded me of the day the government was arrested, it was so thronged with people. And many were the same who had come that day in '43 but now they came not to ask for help, but to say good-by. There were so many, there was such hurry and confusion that I see only a blurred picture of friendly faces, but I have kept the record of what B. said publicly by way of farewell in the two capitals and I will quote from his words.

On December 9, to the Arab leaders when they made him a citizen of Damascus he spoke in French. I give the translation.

I am moved and proud for you have paid me a unique honor. The thought that I am the only Englishman upon whom this distinction has ever been conferred would be too much were it not for the realization that the tribute you are paying me is above all a gesture of friendship toward the country which I have had the honor to represent among you.

Perhaps it is the deep appeal of your historical yearning for liberty which has led you to show such friendliness to my people, who alone in a world laid desolate and threatened with destruction by the forces of oppression dared, solitary and unarmed, to hold on high the flag of liberty, and feed the flame of hope in the world, until the time when other peoples, animated by the same ideal, joined in the struggle and thus made victory sure.

Who, reading through the annals of this war, will doubt that courage is more valuable than weapons, that faith can replace armies and that right is the best of all shields? In the future he who feels weak and discouraged will read the story of the war and will know that hope can never die on the earth.

I am deeply honored by your gesture, but I know that the true Ambassador of Great Britain among you has not been just one man, a general, a Minister, but the ordinary English soldier who in his hundreds of thousands has made himself known and loved in Syria. One of the things of which I am really proud is that never during the years I have spent amongst you have I seen a woman or a child show any sign of fear or even of distrust of these men bearing deadly weapons.

Damascus has always been the ultimate destination in the desert. The caravans dreamed of the coolness of her oasis, the merchants of her bazaars, the conquerors of her riches, and the poets of her gardens. . . . Henceforth there will be another man to dream of Damascus and of the day of his return. In my place in Parliament enveloped in the mists of London I shall only have to close my eyes to conjure up your sunlight, your blue sky and your teeming streets. I shall recall my sojourn among you, my friends, with feelings of deep emotion, and if the time seems long and if I am too homesick, I shall console myself in making plans to return.

And to the Chamber of Deputies of Beirut he said, on December 12:

You are the guardians of the liberty of your country, just as the British Parliament is the guardian of British liberty. Liberty is the most precious of all possessions as those who have fought against Nazism should know.

That is what my country has done without quarter and without truce for the past five years. The liberty that we have preserved in the world is not the prerogative of a few, it is the domain of all, and what that liberty means is set forth in the terms of the Atlantic Charter.

In the great concert of free nations, absolute respect for the independence of each member is the rule. It is the fundamental law of the club. Those who think otherwise are automatically excluded; as in every civilized community the weak have the same rights as the strong.

I am certain of little Lebanon's welcome among the noble company of those who have dared all for freedom and who, refusing to accept defeat, are witnessing at last the dawn of the day of triumph, of victory won at the cost of much blood, many tears and great sacrifice.

We left on the fifteenth of December. Ninth Army mounted a guard of honor at area headquarters. B. inspected the guard, then we drove away. The sea I remember was angry but very blue in the winter sun, the date palms by the shore lashed in the wind, the mountains of the Lebanon were covered with snow.





## PART THREE



## PART THREE

### CHAPTER XXVII

#### I

TO REJOIN the unit in France was a rash thing to do. I should have known this, I had been warned. There was much I didn't know; but had I put the facts I knew together and considered them, they would have made a strong case against my going.

De Gaulle was in Paris, that alone should have been enough to warn me. He was head of a provisional government that had been recognized by the Allies in October. We had reached home, B. and I, for Xmas, I left for Paris three weeks later en route for Alsace and the unit. We had not thought about De Gaulle. We had not seen him since his visit to Beirut in '42. Why should I have been apprehensive? Why expect him to vent his spleen against my husband on the unit? I still believed him to be, if not a great man, a proud Frenchman and a patriot.

We reached Paris in a snowstorm. Dorea was with me, I had found her just as I had left her. "Hello, May." In a big hearty robust second the four years had whisked themselves away. And T. W. was at the Gare St. Lazare to meet us with one of our ancient Fords, and Rosie had come back, she was waiting at our transit hotel. She was limping down the stair as we came stamping in with snowy boots. A slight contretemps with a brick wall had caused the limp and wrecked her car. "May?" I had heard that high sweet voice in sandstorms, in camps like frying pans, in traffic jams of terror-stricken refugees. I shivered as I peeled off overcoat and woolly, but not with cold.

We spent only one night in Paris. I didn't want to stay, had already been away from the unit, I told myself, far too long. So when T. W. asked me, I said no, we would push on next day in spite of the weather and the roads. Both, she said, were bad. It had been snowing for several days. I was glad. I remember thinking "Let it snow, let Paris be shrouded in a white whirling mist, the storm will give me time." For what? Why, to pull myself together and quiet my agitated mind.

Certainly I was nervous. But it was not the presence of De Gaulle that made me so. There were many things to make me tremble with surprise, anticipation, memories of '39; and others that went further back. The house

in the *faubourg* that had been so full of color and music and laughter, old friends who had once climbed those stairs. Some were ghosts now—and the others? I remember staring at the telephone as if it were a hand grenade. There was a woman. Was she there beyond the whirling screen of snow in the room I knew so well? I had loved her. She had had a proud fearless mind and we had had in common a great zest for life, had respected each other's passionate prejudices, had never lied to one another. I remembered her telephone number. Should I lift the receiver? And if I did, if she answered, what could I say, how could I ask what I longed to know? I could say, "This is May," and then, "How are you?" But I couldn't ask, "What have you been doing with yourself all this time? For the trite question had taken on suddenly a portentous meaning, and yet I must know, and was afraid of knowing. What should I do? I edged away from the telephone and turned to the girls. I would postpone that terrifying meeting.

"Where exactly is the unit?"

"In a village called Hohwald in the foothills of the Vosges, twenty miles from Strasbourg."

"Can we make it in a day?"

"Not in this weather. We'll have to sleep in Nancy."

"Well, we've slept in Nancy before." Dorea laughed, she too was excited. "I had a fine feather bed in someone's house. It's five years less a month since we left for St. Jean le Bassel. Can we go back, boss, and see the nuns?"

"Certainly, we must."

"And visit my landlady and Madame Nicolai and old Klein the baker? Do you remember St. Chéron and the bungalow with the handsome brass candlesticks? That was when I had to fetch the rations from Vitry in the middle of the night."

"Then we went on to Rosnay. Do you remember Rosnay? And the Constant Nymph family at Torteron. I wonder what has become of them, and the old man and two small boys with rook rifles who were defending France on the plain of Auvergne, and Mademoiselle de Choiseul who was waiting for the *état-major* that never came."

Yes, I remembered. I remembered as I had never remembered anything before in all my life. I could almost have traced each bend in the long road. Guigny and Amance and the Château of Ancy-le-Franc where I had interrupted General Huntzinger; La Palisse where I had last seen General Réquin, the good brothers at Cannat who had taken us in and Mademoiselle Radenac on her meager knees praying to God. Had He saved her? Suddenly I recalled that we had never said good-by to her. She hadn't been there when we left Noailles that night to make our final dash for Bordeaux. The officers only

had waited up to say good-by. Gosset and Guénin and Bernard, what had become of them? And the hundreds of wounded we had left on their stretchers on the ground at Châlons? That was most dreadfully vivid of all, a silent field of the dead and the dying. What had become of those who had lived? Where were they? What had happened to them after we had gone? What had happened to everyone? Réquin, Gosset, Captain Lecomte? What, in a word, had become of France? Could I bear to find out?

There was one place where I could go without fear or apprehension, my mind flew to it. A small old château by a placid river. It was in the wine country. It held half my husband's childhood. The river was full of fish, the hills rising sharply on the far side were thickly wooded. There was an ancient tower in the garden fitted up as a carpenter shop where an old gentleman in a corduroy jacket had taught small boys to make all manner of useful things. He was dead now. But he had made me feel long ago that B. and I had a home in France, and his son would welcome me, I knew, as of old.

No, it wasn't the thought of General de Gaulle that troubled me when I went back to Paris. It was the past, it was my life, the part of me that I had left in France, and the monstrous war that had come in between me and that other self.

To revisit places and people one has loved after a long absence is like the finding of buried treasure even in a world at peace, but when all the stable world had seemed to be clattering into chaos, then the excitement of re-discovering old familiar things takes on the color of high adventure. But always, even if time alone has been the menace, with the excitement is mingled fear. Will the place be changed? Will the once delightful person be disappointing? How much greater the danger when an evil thing like war has divided their world from yours. I had longed to go back to France but with dread, knowing that it would not be the same.

It is important to make this clear. I did not worry unduly about the head of the French government or the fiasco his representatives had made of their affairs in the Levant, because I was obsessed by the fear of what four years of German occupation had done to France. De Gaulle himself had told me that if the war lasted too long France would be soiled. When I thought of him, I wondered what he felt about it now that he had returned. He had set himself not to restore France to her former grandeur, but to rebuild her on new foundations more solid than those that had crumbled. Her loss of face in the Middle East seemed relatively of no importance. In any case my life there was a separate thing and finished. If I was willing to forget the stings of his little jealous servants, surely he was, and if in spite of his immense preoccupation he still nursed a grudge against his former friend, well, I need

not see him. I had not come to France to ask him for a favor but to discharge a duty undertaken four years ago when his troops were homeless exiles without equipment. That he should object to my continuing the work I had begun did not seem possible.

All this was foolish and mistaken. I should have known better than to have thought that in Alsace with the 1st Free French Division I could escape De Gaulle's resentment and ignore him. France and the Levant were not separate, De Gaulle had forgotten nothing. The division I had followed round the world had a spirit all its own, but it was a part now of an army that had laid down its arms in 1940.

I had had a letter in Beirut from Colonel Vernier with enclosures that should have warned me. He had written in distress to inform me that orders had been received to efface the name of Spears from the hospital. He had protested to General Brosset against the monstrous gesture and sent me copies of the correspondence.

The colonel's letter to General Brosset said, "I have the honor to inform you of a profound uneasiness which affects considerably the work of my unit and is the result of the openly hostile attitude adopted officially by the high command toward the founder of the hospital. I say officially because I have received an order from the *Service de Santé* of the army, requesting me to make disappear the mention of the name Spears from the records and emblems of the unit. The name had already been written in very small letters under the title H.C.M. 3 and this had been done to remind the true combatants of the 1st F.F. Division that the old 'Spears' had become H.C.M. 3 rather than to remind the Ministers on their tours of inspection of a name disagreeable to themselves.

"In the contract signed by General de Gaulle with Lady Spears the 22nd of February, 1941, in London, it is specified that in recognition of the organizers of the unit, the ambulance should bear the name, '*Ambulance Hadfield-Spears*.' It is under this name that it has followed the division in good days and bad, in the different deserts where it has been at war and has suffered losses. Certain of our finest comrades have come to us to die saying to the drivers of their ambulances, 'Carry us to Spears,' putting rightly or wrongly their last hope in this name and in what it represented for them."

And General Brosset had promised to take the matter up with the army and had authorized Colonel Vernier to ignore the order in the meantime.

"It would be difficult," Brosset had written, "to make headquarters share my feelings, considering the personalities who have been recently mixed up with the life of our group or who have lately been put in contact with it. It would be and will be more difficult to make us forget that Spears signifies for

us the familiar and much loved house to which we are so profoundly attached that if one day we must make the supreme sacrifice we can ask nothing better than to fulfill it at "Spears" nursed by our Quakers and helped by our dear nurses."

But now Brosset was dead, and the question of the name of the unit was in suspense. It was a matter to be dealt with. I had consulted my husband in Beirut, and on my return to London Dorea and Leslie Benson, who represented the British War Relief Committee in America. They had all agreed that action must be taken and I had decided after much painful thought to deal with the question myself. In doing so I had fastened for comfort on Brosset's hint that the order had emanated from new elements in the high command. Our division was clearly no party to the insult, and I did not believe that De Gaulle knew of it. If the division stood by me, I believed that all would yet be well.

I had had other more cheerful news from the hospital since their landing in the south of France. A small party had gone on ahead with the French commander and had landed on a beach near a village called Le Canadel in the Bay of St. Maxime on August 14, D-1 Day; the main body of the unit had disembarked at Fréjus on the thirtieth. The party with the commander had consisted of the colonel, Dr. Jibery, Rachel Howell-Evans, Joan Pryke, our French sergeant Nocitto and four of the F.A.U. boys, and Rachel had written me the following letter.

Dear Lady Spears,

I wish you had been with us on our adventure with the Commandos. You would have enjoyed it. We were fetched by one of their officers on the 9th of August and stayed with them until the 11th in a small village near Salerno, when we were embarked on a naval ship called the "Prince David." The ship was one of three lying some way out to sea and we were taken to her in the landing craft which later landed us on the French coast. Two pulleys whisked us up and swung us on board the ship, complete in one little boat. The sailors were surprised to see Joan and me as no women were expected, and two officers had to turn out of their comfortable cabins for us, but they were very nice about it.

We were landed the following day on a wild, deserted part of Corsica and remained there until the morning of the 14th. While the Commandos did their final exercises, we bathed and lay on the beach watching the ever growing fleet of ships. By the 14th when we embarked again our three ships had grown to an Armada; every size and shape of ship from battleships to motor torpedo boats, invasion craft and aircraft carriers. We

sailed along together for some hours, then various contingents broke off one by one until we were left with our original three ships and an escort of destroyers.

We were then given our final orders, the engines of the landing craft carrier ceased ticking over and the ships lay almost motionless. At 9:30 P.M. "Action Stations" was sounded, all the lights of the ship went out and the crew went to their various posts, even the *padré* and cook had some special role. I wrote down our final orders.

*"Attention! attention! les Commandos Français se rassembleront dans une demi-heure sur le pont près de leurs embarcations. Terminé, terminé, terminé."* It sounded very impressive.

We watched the first lot of Commandos get into their landing craft, all picked men with specific jobs, some went right inland to contact the Maquis, others were to climb Cap Nègré to silence the shore batteries, others had to wait on the beaches to guide the rest of us in.

We began now to get ready ourselves. I discovered that someone had taken my tin hat and another had to be fetched for me from store. I was certain this was a bad omen as I had had that particular tin hat with me everywhere. At midnight we got into our boat. Silently and without hurry we sorted ourselves out. I managed to get myself up on the side of the boat, then when everyone was on board plus a jeep and our four panniers of medical equipment we were lowered noiselessly into the sea, the boat's engine began ticking over and we drifted, waiting for the other three landing craft and the motor torpedo boat that was to pilot us in.

After a ten-minute wait that seemed endless we started off. A pitch-black night, no moon or stars and no sound save the pop-popping of the engine and the lapping of the water against the boat's sides. This was the part that impressed me most. We were not allowed to smoke or talk or move and it took us two hours to reach the beach. Plenty of time to think. Later there wasn't time to get excited or frightened. For what seemed ages we chuffed along in the utter blackness, seeing and hearing nothing, then at last, to the left came the faint muffled sound of guns getting more distinct every minute, and out of the darkness ahead we began to see sparks which grew into gun flashes, Very lights, rockets and flares and slowly the outline of the coast of France came into view.

A landing craft drifted past silently, empty except for the crew. We didn't dare call to them and ask how things were going. Half a mile offshore after waiting for a while we took leave of the other L.C.'s and the M.T.B. and made our way alone toward the beach. We felt the boat



ground, the drawbridge was lowered and we walked onto the shore of France.

We had been told that we would find a path following the steps up from the beach and that this would lead us to a railway line, that we should turn left along this and that 500 yards on we would come to a tunnel where we were to spend the rest of the night, using it as a first-aid post. So we left David Rowlands and Nocitto to guard the panniers and went up the path, we had to cut some barbed wire to get through. We found the railway and followed it as ordered but there was no tunnel.

There was a small house with a light showing so we went up to it to ask how far the tunnel was. The people were overjoyed to see us and gave us wine and grapes but we had hardly taken our packs off our backs when a Commando came running up to say we'd been landed on the wrong beach and must come back at once to be re-embarked. So with much grumbling we started off again down the railway track. Mortar fire and various other noises had begun by now, and were increasing. We hadn't got very far when we met the colonel, who had gone to investigate. He told us the mortar fire had got too accurate for the boat, it couldn't wait for us, and it had pushed off; and there were a considerable number of Germans between us and our objective, the tunnel.

As it was five miles to the tunnel, he said we must take to the hills and try to reach the Commandos by a roundabout way. The old man in the house gave us our bearings and we set off, single file rather like "Grandmother's steps" cursing if anyone kicked a stone or made any noise. We couldn't see anything in the dark. The colonel was in the lead, his revolver ready cocked and he held us up once for quite five minutes while he crept round and challenged a deserted horse and cart. A bit further along we thought we heard guttural voices coming from the other side of a hedge so we all crept forward on our hands and knees making much more noise than on our two feet. Eventually we reached the track over the hills the old man had described but it was very steep and rough going, we kept falling into holes and bumping into trees and getting ourselves and our packs tied up in prickly bushes for it was still pitch-dark. We got so puffed that when we heard someone coming and tried to give the correct Commando whistle we could let out nothing but a series of squeaks, so in desperation we shouted "Français," but there was no reply, so we lay a little flatter on the ground and the footsteps went away. All this time there was a fair amount of shell and rifle fire and every now and then the hills would be lit up by Very lights and flares.

We reached the top at daybreak and decided to have an hour's rest,

but had hardly settled down when we were rudely awakened by American bombers who seemed to come over in hordes at five-minute intervals and make straight for us, diving singly with their machine guns spitting and each dropping two bombs at the end of the dive. The colonel kept saying, "Keep down, don't move, they've seen us and mistaken us for Germans." By the time it was over we were covered in bits of trees, earth and shrapnel and were completely black but no one was even slightly wounded. '

Two Commando scouts who'd been sent out to find us came along soon after this, so off we went again, reaching Commando H.Q. at 9:30 where we watched a dog fight overhead and ate a few biscuits. The colonel of the Commandos told us there was a suitable house for a dressing station two kilos further on, so off we set again, this time down hill and even worse going. We got so tangled in the undergrowth that it took us three hours to get through and when the R.A.F. came along dropping rations by parachute we were too embedded in the wood to get any. And then at last, after walking another five kilos we found ourselves back in the village where we had landed, "Le Canadel," by now cleared of Germans, and there on the beach were Nocitto and David Rowlands. They had been badly bombed and shelled but had managed to set up a first-aid post on the beach, then when it got noisy had moved to a hut on the railway.

Quite a lot of military and civilian wounded had collected by this time, so we hurriedly chose a suitable house in the village and while the colonel went off to do an urgent amputation Joan and I got it ready, moving furniture out of the way and sweeping up broken glass with wounded arriving all the time. The colonel operated most of the night. The Commandos sent us down rations next day and German medical supplies and some German prisoners to act as orderlies and six horses and three carts which we used for fetching supplies and evacuating light cases. We heard tanks rumbling past the following night and realized that the Americans had arrived, and the following day our division began to disembark near St. Raphael. We stayed three days in Le Canadel then moved on by horse cart to Le Lavandou where we had the wounded from the division to look after as well as the Commandos. As there was some hitch over the arrival of the A.C.L. we had a lot of work. We admitted 112 wounded in one night, making 200 with those we already had.

We kept on with the shock troops of the division as far as Lyons moving nearly every day to keep up with the advance and there the rest of the unit joined us and we went back to normal again.

The colonel too had written me in high feather. He had been very proud of the fact that when General Brosset landed with the division, "Spears was already there," but the three captains, Thibaut, Cupigny, and Guénan, who had been left behind, had been so angry that they had all resigned in a body. Thibaut it transpired had come back later but things hadn't been the same since in the unit. Jealousy, Jean had said when she wrote to me. They couldn't forgive the colonel for slipping off in the middle of the night without telling anyone. How could he when he was sworn to secrecy? She didn't blame him, but she wasn't at all happy about the unit. She enclosed a statement of their itinerary since landing.

I went over it with T. W. that night in Paris. She got her map from her haversack and we followed the unit's trail.

"Here we are. 'Fréjus. We landed on August 30th. September 3rd Aix-en-Provence. One night at Aix. 4th Vals. 6th Lyons. Fine reception at Lyons. All the town flagged. 10th Dax. 12th Dijon. The division was moving up to Belfort so we turned east at Dijon and reached Villa Sexel on the 16th. Up to that point all the people had been very friendly. At Villa Sexel they were quite different. No more cheers, no one would help us. An awful place. We stayed two months then were ordered back across France to Saintes, near Cognac. A three-day convoy. De Larminat was going to attack the Germans on the Gironde. The roads were awful, half the trucks were bogged or broken down. We'd no sooner got there than the fuss started on the Rhine, so back we went again, this time to Hohwald where we are now.' What time will you start in the morning?"

"As early as you like."

"Nine o'clock."

"Right." She gave a pull to her tunic, said good night and stumped away.

## II

Hohwald was deep in snow. It looked enchanting in the morning sun. Rosy-cheeked children were out with their sleds. A typical Alsatian village on a Christmas card.

It had been dark when we arrived, only chinks of light showing under the deep eaves of the gabled houses along the narrow winding street. There had been a sheen of starlight and the sound of wind in the branches of a thousand pines, the mountains had been only dimly visible. But we had been too tired and cold to feel the charm of the shrouded valley.

We had been battling our way through a blizzard for two days, sharing the storm the first day with the American Army. A disappointing drive. I had

seen nothing of the old road to Nancy, and we had found the Americans in possession of the town. The Hotel Thiers wouldn't take us in. It had been very different from that other winter night five years before when Captain Lecomte had come to meet us. The only accommodation available to us as members of the French forces was in a third-rate commercial hotel that had known no heating since the beginning of the war. We had spent a dreadful night. A slattern in a black shawl with swollen hands had consented in return for a tin of Nescafé to let us make some for ourselves in the morning on her oil stove, but it wasn't until we reached Sarrebourg that we got warm. There, in our old haunt, the Hotel Bourg, we were lucky for we had reached the sector of General Leclerc's division, and the French officers who had their mess in the hotel had been charming. They had been stationed, they told us, in Yorkshire and could not say enough about the kindness of the Yorkshire people. Their colonel, moreover, had given me news of Lecomte, he was now a major in General Leclerc's staff and stationed not far from Hohwald. I could easily go and see him.

The hospital occupied most of the village, and it had grown to four times its original size, was full of strange officers and nurses, and though working hard with its four hundred beds full of wounded was in a state of confused unrest.

The operating rooms, principal surgical wards and offices were in the Grand Hotel, there was an *annexe* for the medical cases in a smaller hotel that had been the former home of the local *Gauleiter*, the *personnel féminin* was quartered all over the place. Rooms had been prepared for Dorea and me at Madame Eboué's *Pension de Famille*, because they were warm and under the same roof as the mess. T. W. and Rosie, Rachel, Jocelyn and Iris were on our floor, most of the English nurses were just below us, but Jean had a room with Pat in the Grand Hotel, the three French girls of the Blood Transfusion Unit were billeted in the village and four French Red Cross nurses were living in the *annexe*. The colonel had a room in a house at the foot of the path that led steeply up to the pension. He seemed delighted to meet Dorea but ill at ease with me.

Looking back I realized now that the confusion and discord in the hospital reflected what was happening throughout France. Was not France herself in the winter of 1945 a medley of discordant elements with her F.F.I. and F.T.P., her heroic resistance and her bogus resistance, her Pétainists and her *milice* and her armies from overseas who were straining their strength to the utmost limit of endurance so that France should not be said to have been liberated by strangers? And were not those frail armies themselves fretted by discord and obliged to endure an uneasy partnership with the vast legions of America and Great Britain?

The hospital was uneasy as France was uneasy. Every ward now had its F.F.I. orderlies to supplement our British F.A.U. boys, every service was manned in part by new officers, surgeons, medical men, dentists, chemists and clerks who had carried on at home for better or worse during the occupation and had now been enrolled in the division. Who were they? How was I to accommodate myself to these strangers? And the place swarmed with French women most of whom I had never seen before. Certainly the colonel had not kept his promise to limit the hospital to two hundred beds, nor consulted me when he took on new nurses. But how could I blame him? I had been away for six months. When he had applied to Dorea for reinforcements from London the British Ministry of Labour had flatly refused to allow any English nurses to go abroad to foreign units, so he had been obliged to increase his staff as best he could, picking up new orderlies, nurses and officers here and there, in a haphazard fashion as he traveled through France. The four Red Cross girls had joined at Saintes. Someone had collected a strange young woman with wild hair from a farm in the south. Another had been admitted as a patient and was staying on as an unofficial assistant to one of the new surgeons. Frances, the sister in charge of the operating room, was being driven to a frenzy by strange women who kept erupting into her sanctum in the wake of our new officers, gave an anesthetic or two, created minor chaos then disappeared leaving her to clear up the mess.

The British members of the staff, masculine as well as feminine, were submerged in the flood of newcomers and many were incensed at the way the hospital was being run. But Jean was most unhappy of them all. Her professional conscience and her loyalty to me were both outraged. She and the colonel were scarcely on speaking terms and she had made up her mind to leave. She could no longer be responsible, she declared, for the care of the patients. They themselves complained. Several of those in the *annexe* had asked, "What has happened to Spears? This isn't the way we were looked after when we came in the last time." She had no authority over the French nurses. Anyone the surgeons fancied was allowed to give an anesthetic. It was sheer luck that there had been no fatal accidents and the F.F.I. were awful. Resistance? Their idea of resistance had been to come out of their hiding holes, take pot shots at the Germans when they were in the mood, and loot any house they fancied. There was constant thieving in the wards. They took the patients' money from under their pillows when they were asleep. There was no discipline. She had protested to no avail. She had invoked my name and the high reputation of the hospital in vain. The colonel was sacrificing the good name of the unit. She was very overwrought.

"But Jean, you can't leave me now when the war is nearly at an end." I was consternated. She was very sweet but determined to go.

The colonel when I spoke of Jean's decision at once became very excited. Jean was quite changed. He had to have nurses. Miss Stanhope could send none. What was he to do? He had given Jean authority over the French girls, she had refused to accept it. Admittedly they were not highly trained, but Jean and Edith could train them if only they would. Now that I had arrived they would all be under my orders, I could send away any I didn't like. But we were in France now and everything was different. He was being inundated with demands from French women with no nursing experience, to be taken on. All the young women in France who had friends or relatives in the division wanted to join the unit. He would be only too glad to hand the matter over to me.

We made a tour of inspection. The large surgical wards were full of wounded, the English sisters were in charge here and I found nothing wrong. Many of the patients knew me. They were old clients of the house and greeted me as a friend. There were gay knitted coverlets on the beds, there was new oilcloth on the dressing tables; all was tidy as of old.

Germaine Sablon was doing the rounds. She was handing out soap, razors, playing cards and cigarettes. If Germaine hasn't figured as yet in this story it is not because she wasn't liked, but because she had seemed to me until now an elusive creature. She was Barbara's discovery. She had come to sing to the patients in Tunisia, and Barbara had taken a great fancy to her, so at Barbara's request I had asked her to join us and take charge of the foyer, and when Barbara had left she had stayed on. I was aware of her warm exuberant charm, I knew that she had worked in the resistance in France and was 100 per cent Free French but I didn't really know her. Now she greeted me with such cordiality that I was drawn to her as never before. A bustling creature with laughing blue eyes, she stands out in my memory from all the other French women who helped us. She was gay, vigorous, slapdash. She would go off to Paris with an empty truck and return loaded with good things for the men. Bottles of wine, tins of sardines, chocolate, cocoa, cigarettes, woolen gloves and scarves, coverlets. Our old blue blankets had disappeared, thank God. The gay coverlets were Germaine's present.

The colonel and I continued our round. The *Cabinet Dentaire* was on the first floor and the hall was like the waiting room in a railway station. Abouchard, our old dentist, was a friend. He was a Syrian with a French wife. I met his new colleague Prochasson for the first time. He too was to become a friend. Between them they seemed to be fitting out the whole division with new teeth. Up another flight of stairs. Things not so good at the top of the house in the long rows of small rooms. There appeared to be no nurse in charge. The patients lay alone in untidy beds. Dirty dishes stood about;

measles in there, query typhoid here, bronchitis next door. A fat young French woman came mincing along. Was she a proper nurse? No, the colonel admitted, she was not. He was vague as to when and where he had found her, she was somebody's sister or cousin.

They had tidied up the *annexe* for our inspection and the four girls of the French Red Cross were lined up beside Albert and Nocitto. They looked rather frightened. The colonel presented them, another Françoise, then Franchette, then Hélène. I shook hands. These three were to turn out very well. A Christmas card came the other day from Indo-China, signed Françoise and Franchette. But I could not but agree with Jean about the *annexe*. There were a hundred patients crowded into the small building. One room was filled with two-decker beds, like bunks in a ship. The linen was dingy; there was a bad smell.

Certainly there was much to be done. To get the hospital shipshape would demand patience and a great deal of tact. The *personnel féminin* must be weeded out, but I must go gently and try to make our own lot understand. There was nothing for it, we were in France and everything was different.

A series of interviews began in my little room, almost all with my own British staff. Difficult interviews. Some were shocked by the flirtations going on, others incensed by the attitude of the new doctors, others by the feeling they had met with in the country. The village had been downright pro-German they said before we came. All complained of Villa Sexel. Several wanted to resign. There was dissension even among the Quakers.

Again and again I explained and appealed to them to see the thing through. We couldn't hope, I said, to go back to the old days when we had been a small compact homogeneous mobile unit. We were in France now and everything was different; the colonel had said it, I said it. It wasn't fair to blame him for enlarging the hospital. The division was heavily engaged. It counted on us. The French Medical Service in France was all in confusion, the local hospitals were without adequate supplies. There were no supplies of any kind in France, save those that came from the Allies, and nothing functioned properly outside the army. Where were these wounded men to go if we didn't take them? We had never yet refused to do what was asked of us. If the division wanted us to supply beds for four hundred men then we must do so, and I must do the best I could about pulling the hospital together. Dorea backed me up. We managed to persuade most of the British unit to stay, but Jean remained adamant.

"But Jean, the war will soon be over. I want the unit to end in style with flags flying."

She was sorry. She must go home.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### I

THE colonel had arranged for me to see General Garbet, our divisional commander, concerning the name of the unit and we went together soon after my arrival.

"I can swear to you," the colonel said, "that General Garbet is as angry about this *muflerie* caddishness as I am."

I had first met Garbet in Suez when we dropped anchor there in '41. His ship had lain alongside the "Otranto." He was a major then and had come up from the south with a shipload of blacks from the Chad. Now he had succeeded Brosset in command of the division. A very different type from Brosset, he was painfully shy and was reputed to be a woman hater. He looked at me very straight out of deep brown serious eyes.

I told him I was greatly disturbed by a feeling of hostility in some quarters against my husband. The change in the name of the hospital was difficult to explain on any other ground. I could not continue to work for the division unless something could be done to remove the impression.

He answered that the hostility I had sensed was not only toward me but toward the whole division; that the War Office, i.e., the *Ministère de la Guerre*, seemed to want to destroy it, that he would take the matter up with the Minister of War and General Juin. He assured me with great earnestness that no one in his command was capable of feeling anything toward me but the deepest gratitude. "The hospital is known and loved," he said, "as 'Spears' tout court throughout the division."

"You understand, General, why I am pressing the point?"

"I do, and I would refer you to General Guériac. I will see to the Paris end, but the order came from the *Service de Santé* of the army and Guériac is the medical inspector."

"General de Lattre is the army commander?"

"Yes."

"We are under his orders?"

"Yes, but Guériac is the man to see."

"Where is he?"



"In Belfort."

"Very well, I'll go to Belfort."

Dorea came with me, T. W. drove us. What a drive! The road at first led down the valley through a series of small ruined towns, not merely pillaged, gutted. The Germans had deliberately set fire to them before clearing out. Nothing left but charred buildings and heaps of blackened brick and stone. In some not a house was standing. It was thawing, the roads were muddy rivers, the scene under the lowering sky that threatened rain or a new fall of snow was desolate and dreary beyond belief, but here and there a solitary old woman, bent double, was tottering among the ruins and poking with her stick. Then we climbed through pine forests. We had to go over the col, a high pass, as the lower road was still held by the Germans. The battle for Colmar was at its height, and we became involved in an interminable convoy. It grew colder, the mountain road was narrow and deep in icy slush with banks of snow on either side. The going wouldn't have been too difficult if the convoys had all been heading in one direction. T. W. driving superbly could just manage by sticking to the wheel ruts in the skiddy slush but if she left them we were done, and when a convoy going south met a convoy coming north the thing was hopeless. A five-ton Renault would come swinging down on us, try to pass, T. W. would shout, the juggernaut came on, a sickening lurch, a grinding noise, the sound of splintering and tearing, we both were bogged and all the great vehicles behind in both directions were brought to a stop.

We spent five hours on the top of the col among the snowy pines. The forest resounded to shouts and good-humored curses. Dorea and I stayed huddled in our sheepskins, but T. W. was out in the slush continually with a spade. She seemed to be the only driver in the whole French Army who carried one. I shall always remember her stocky khaki figure, her heavy army boots, her raw red hands, as she tramped and shouted and shoveled snow from under army trucks.

A weary business. When the road was free we crept forward skidding and lurching, then the first truck of a new oncoming convoy would appear ahead and the drama would begin again. We lost a wing and smashed a head lamp. It was growing dark as we descended; at nine our lights gave out and we had to stop. Where were we?

I looked out on a scene worthy of the *Purgatorio*. Broken black masses loomed to either side, ruined jagged wall, lit by the moving headlights of the lumbering convoys. Ahead of us what seemed to be a square full of elephants bogged in the snow, shadowy figures moved clumsily, stamping, shouting,

the narrow street resounded to the grinding of many brakes, the rumbling of interminable wheels. Gunfire in the distance.

But look, there quite close was a lighted window. It glowed between two broken walls. The word "Café" showed on the yellow shade. T. W. was out and through the door in a second. "All right," she said a moment later. "We are in Plombières. We can eat and sleep here, no sheets but it looks clean."

We parked the car in the square alongside the great discouraged trucks and carried our belongings through the slush to the café. Two old men were playing draughts beside a glowing stove. We sat down at one of the marble-topped tables. The old men nodded in a friendly fashion, a buxom woman brought us hot potato soup, jugged hare and cheese, a bottle of *Château Neuf du Pâpe*. We followed it with kirsch and presently tumbled into blissful beds to sleep like happy infants among the ruins, the Battle of Colmar clean forgotten.

I find a note in my diary of the following day:

The pompous hotel in Belfort with marble pillars and an immense staircase is quite the worst lodging we have struck yet. It is requisitioned for French officers and we saw some wandering dejectedly about the great gloomy place. A sorry-looking lot. The hotel ice-cold and almost dark, in the vast foyer one dim electric light near the ceiling. A cripple with a red nose was huddled behind the desk, otherwise there was no one, no servants to look after the place, no hot water even in the kitchen, so no hot-water bottles for our damp icy beds; and no *petit déjeuner* in the immense dining room in the morning, nothing but filthy tablecloths, dirty dishes and crumbs from the night before. The cook hadn't deigned to come. The wretched officers who poked their heads in, like ourselves looking for coffee, had to go away again.

General Guérriac was an old acquaintance. He had been in Beirut in '41 and had come often to our house. Later he had turned up with Reilinger in Tobruk, later still I had found him in Algiers, a fat old man with a round red benevolent face like Father Christmas without a beard, we had always been on friendly terms and I had thought of him as a kind old thing.

He seemed now to be glad to see me and denied all knowledge of the order to efface the name of Spears from the hospital.

"It didn't come," he said, "from this office, madame, I assure you."

"I attach importance to the name, General, not only because it is in part my own but because of the American committee that continues to support the hospital on the understanding that I remain in charge."

"I quite understand."

"It was General de Gaulle who chose the name."

"I know."

"Do you authorize me to put it back?"

"Certainly."

"I may tell the colonel that we have your permission to order a new official stamp bearing the title H.C.M. 3 with *Ambulance Hadfield-Spears* underneath?"

"You may."

It was only when I got back to Hohwald that I found he had lied to me. When I reported my interview to the colonel, it was too much for him to stomach and he produced the order. It stated clearly that General de Lattre de Tassigny and the Minister of War Monsieur Diethelm, after visiting H.C.M. 3 had given instructions that the name Spears should be effaced from the hospital. The order had come from Guérriac's office and bore his official stamp. It must have been in his files while he talked to me.

The colonel and I looked at each other. What was there to say? That a slight had been intended was evident. Should I go chasing after General de Lattre or should I take the matter direct to General de Gaulle? I did not believe that he would be glad to see me but I did believe that he was unaware of this discourtesy and that he would be shocked when he heard of it. It was with him that I had to do if with anyone. Or again should I leave the case in Garbet's hands and pretend to be satisfied? I thought a moment. The colonel was ordering a new stamp, the name Hadfield-Spears was being put back where it belonged. What did it signify that General de Lattre de Tassigny and Monsieur Diethelm disliked the name Spears? The men of the 1st Free French Division felt otherwise, they would defend it. I said to the colonel, "I shall pretend to be content."

It was a day or two later that Colonel de Lange of the Foreign Legion and Lalande called on me. They would be honored, they said, if I would dine with them. Would I bring the Spirettes and the English nurses on the evening that suited me? They made no reference to the vexatious subject of the unit's name but I understood the gesture.

I suspect the girls of being at the back of it. T. W. or Rachel, Jocelyn too, perhaps. Jocelyn might easily have said something at divisional H.Q. when she went to fetch the post. Rachel and T. W. had many friends in the division ready to do their bidding and take up arms on my behalf. Officers of the legion, the *Chasseurs Alpains*, the *Fusiliers Marins*. There were three *Fusiliers Marins*, but that is another story.

It was a wonderful party. The mess was in an inn about twenty miles

from Hohwald, many officers were present. There were toasts and speeches and comic songs and a huge cake with "Spears" in icing and a great deal to drink. There was also a good deal of talk about General de Lattre de Tassigny. One of my neighbors at table was very outspoken about General de Lattre. He had set out, he said, to ruin the division and he was succeeding. They had been given no rest since they had landed in France, no time to reorganize after a battle, nor to train new recruits; and gradually their best officers were being taken away from them. He had been with two others to Paris to protest to General de Gaulle. "We are his own troops after all, who have been with him from the beginning—but, well—"

"Do you mean to say he wasn't sympathetic?"

"He was very nice. He asked us to dinner *en famille*, but he has other things to think about now."

At ten o'clock when the electricity was cut off little lights in cups were put down on the long tables and Germaine sang to us in her deep warm husky voice. How friendly it was. Yes, that was it, I was among friends. Nothing that had happened in Syria, nothing that ever happened would make these men forget the unit that had joined them in Aldershot four years ago. Palestine, Syria, Libya, North Africa, Italy and now Alsace. We had traveled a long road together and would continue till the fighting was done. General de Lattre had no part in our common adventure, and General de Gaulle seemed to have lost interest in it. We were in France now, as the colonel had said, and everything was different, even for the Free French Division.

They had rejoined their wives and families but I wondered if that had consoled them for what they found in France. Some I knew were very bitter. I knew of at least one who had found even the welcome of his relatives painfully disappointing. He had told me that he had seen and talked to something like a hundred family friends and relations since he had landed in France and that out of the hundred he had found only two who were interested in the war. One an old man, a family retainer who had fought in the last war, the other a woman, his wife's cousin. When he appeared at her door she had cried, "At last a soldier in the family," and had burst into tears. Several of his relations had talked freely of how their business affairs had prospered with the Germans. He spoke of a profound psychological change among the people of France, a habit of cringing, hesitating, being careful. I had noticed the same thing among some of our new doctors. They were timid and apologetic, seemed as if about to look over their shoulders when they talked to me to see if anyone were spying on them, would check the movement, smile painfully; and a woman in the village of Hohwald had said to me, "We always used to say 'Auf Wiedersehen' at the front door—"

never 'au revoir.' Even now when I leave someone's house I find myself saying good-by in German. One cannot cure oneself quickly of a habit of fear."

## II

It was quite soon after my arrival at Hohwald that I drove over to see Major Lecomte, but it wasn't until Shrove Tuesday that we made our pilgrimage to St. Jean le Bassel.

Lecomte was not much changed, a little thinner, the skin tighter over the bones of his pale face, but he had the same gentle smile and exquisite courtesy. He told me that General Réquin had been ill and gave me his Paris address. I must be sure to let the general know when I was there, they had talked so often about us, and had been shocked by the report in the French papers of General Spears's assassination. It had never been denied but they had learned happily that it wasn't true. We spoke of the old days. He asked after the young ladies who had come sometimes to Vic. Miss Tomlin? Miss Graham? T.W.? It was not possible to ask him how he had lived through the last four years, nor was it necessary. Looking into his fine-drawn face I knew what I had known when I met General Georges in Algiers. Lecomte had never made friends with the enemies of my country. All was well.

Would it be the same at the convent? We had been doubtful of the nuns. Réquin had warned me; he had been very uneasy about the people of the village. I remembered the photographs in the cottages of men in German uniform. The Germans had had a large military hospital in the convent in 1914-1918, all the garden had been full of their wooden huts. Now they had taken possession again and stayed four years. It was with some trepidation that Dorea, T. W., Jean and I started off for St. Jean. Would the nuns be glad to see us after all this time? Would they even remember us?

The season was the same. We had arrived in Lorraine just five years ago but now we were approaching from a part of the country that had been occupied by the German Army in 1940. Here was Saverne. "Look," I cried, "the pink village, where Boddles and I went painting and heard old Auguste the town crier calling a new class to the colors."

On we sped, into Sarrebourg. Just up the street was the sweetshop that Evelyn used to frequent and opposite was the place where I had bought the wireless so that I could tune in to London during those tragic days. But we mustn't stop. Yes, over the bridge, then right and there is the turn for Fénétrange, and there are the convent gates, and here we are in the village street. It was like a fairy tale.

But St. Jean had been deep in snow when we arrived in '39. This time a thaw had set in and the mounds of manure at the front doors of the little houses were oozing dark liquid into squelching mud; and the village was full of American troops and an American flag flew from the convent gate. Nevertheless it was the same. The street curved round the convent walls and straggled into the little square under the great towering convent barns, and there was Klein's the baker who had made hot cross buns marked with swastikas on that Shrove Tuesday five years ago.

"We won't go to the convent yet," I said, "or the nuns will feel they must give us lunch. We'll lunch at Klein's if he'll have us."

"And call on my old girl," Dorea said.

"And mine," T. W. said.

"And Madame Nichalai for Maria and Madame Bernard."

The American Army in St. Jean must have been very surprised that day to see four women in khaki clambering over the manure heaps to knock on cottage doors and be hugged against the buxom laughing bosoms of the village housewives and dragged inside with shouts of laughter. What a welcome we had. Cakes and kirsch were brought out in each kitchen, and how the tongues wagged, and what a lunch old Klein set before us. It was three by the time we staggered back to the car and turned in at the convent gate.

There was the priest's house on the left, and on the right the outbuilding where we used to go for hot baths, and behind the priest's house was the graveyard where we had buried our dead. I trembled a little as we drew up at the front door and rang.

It was opened by the plump comic sister who had always made us laugh. Her round red face between the great wings of her coif was a study, she stared transfixed, then lifted her fat hands to heaven and with a very unsaintly whoop of joy cried, "*Madame la Générale! C'est Madame la Générale!*" And went scuttling off calling at the top of her voice, "*Madame la Générale est là. Madame la Générale est là.*"

Then they all came flocking round us like excited birds, the beautiful Soeur Assistante, the withered little Soeur Econome and my own Sister Marie Jeanne. They led us into the parlor and made us sit down, and their faces were radiant. They asked after the general, who had passed there one day five years ago, and my son "Monsieur Michael," who had stayed for a week, and the nurses and the young ladies, they remembered every one; and then they told us about the Boches who had come the day after the last French doctors had gone, and the comic one whose name I never knew made a pantomime of the Germans' arrival. "What, no French here?" they had said. "*Keine Franzosen?*" They were very angry when they found the birds had flown.

Oh how angry they had been. But the huts in the garden that General Réquin had given us they called "Wunderbar," and had taken away.

Yes, the Soeur Assistante said, they had taken my little house away and the water colors General Réquin had given me. They had filled our wing of the building with wounded and had driven their tanks through the garden destroying many of the trees and lilac bushes. Her fine blue eyes were clouded, they were almost stormy for a moment. I thought I saw her long delicate hands quiver in her lap, then she smiled:

"But it is you, *Madame la Générale*, who have had wonderful adventures," and we had to tell of them. "Libya, Tunisia," they repeated the names after us breathlessly, with shining eyes. How brave, how wonderful! It was like telling a story to children.

Sister Marie Jeanne slipped away, but now she came back and led us into the small sitting room by the front door where Lady Hadfield and I had been received that first day long ago. A table was set with a white cloth and we were made to sit down to coffee and cakes and a *compôte de Mirabelle*. They all waited on us, they stood round us as we sat down, and dear Sister Marie Jeanne put beside my plate a frail porcelain cup with a garland of pink roses, and I recognized it, for it was the cup she had brought to my room every morning.

"Oh—" I said, "my own cup, Marie Jeanne."

"Yes, *Madame la Générale*, it is your cup and you have not forgotten." And she clapped her worn hands with delight, but her eyes were filled with tears.

Pitiable France, miserable France; hungry, cold, torn by dissension. Cities without fires, farms and fields without cattle, men without regret. In Alsace there was food and firewood, at Madame Eboué's one lived well, there was cold ham for tea and *pâté de foie gras* to spread on hot buttered toast, but the vineyards all around were strewn with mines. German mines and mines of the U.S. Army, one kind as deadly as the other, and up above the village, high on the mountain with a view across the Alsatian plain to Strasbourg and the Rhine was the German concentration camp of Struthof where twenty thousand men and women had been put to death. She took us up there, good Madame Eboué, for the small hotel that the commandant of the camp had requisitioned for his use belonged to her, and her niece had lived in the farm across the field all those years, within earshot of the tortured.

The niece was a frail young woman with a lovely Madonna face; she showed us the gas chamber where the Jewish women had been murdered. It was like a large *Frigidaire* with smooth white walls. Nothing to cling to, she said. They were stripped naked, and their eyes put out, then bundled

in thirty together, and the German guard would stroll up and down outside till the screaming stopped and they knew that it was finished. "We could hear the screams at our house," she said, "but after a time we got so used to them that we didn't hear them any more." And she looked at me with a sad apologetic smile.

The world has been told enough, one would presume, about such camps. Struthof was a small affair compared to Belsen. The piles of scalps discovered and the butcher shop need not be described. We didn't go into the great barbed-wire enclosure for it held a new lot of prisoners, the French had taken it over and had interned several hundred Alsatian collaborators, and I had no wish to stare at them. But we met a procession of women coming in from a walk through the golden afternoon and I stood watching them with amazement as they marched through the gate in the wire. For they wore fur coats and high-heeled shoes, some had on silk stockings, their faces were sullen, their carriage haughty, even arrogant, and an old lady, very smart in a black coat and skirt with a stiff hat tilted on her neat white hair, headed the procession.

I said to Madame Eboué's charming niece, "Do they know what the Germans did here in this camp?" And she said yes, they had been shown the horrors but they didn't seem to care. We were making our way across to the farm to tea and as we talked we went along a path through a vegetable garden that the former prisoners had made for the German commandant, the one who had gone mad after beating four hundred men to death. There were small white specks and splinters scattered thickly on the earth of the garden to fertilize it, I supposed, but they looked strange to me and my companion said, yes, they were human bones from the camp incinerator, then she led us in to tea.

### III

We moved south from Alsace at the end of March. The division did not advance as we had hoped into Germany. It was transferred from De Lattre's army to the Army of the Alps and ordered to the Mediterranean, so we followed it to that brittle coast of abandoned casinos, luxury hotels made over to the American Army, and silly villas with ruined gardens and broken windows.

I had been with Rachel to Paris and had motored down the great highroad through Auxerre to Lyons. We had to pass through V—— and when we drew near I said:

"Rachel, I would like to stop at the next village. There is a graveyard on a



little hill, you will see the church." And I find this note in my diary written on Easter Sunday, April 1st '45.

France was beautiful, the great rivers and the forests are unchanged. The tall poplars along the road are straight as arrows. All the valleys were opalescent yesterday with plum blossom and peach and the frail green of new leaves. We stopped at V—— and drove up the hill to the church. I didn't go to the château for I knew no one was there. It was pillaged by the Germans, Marcel had told me, because of the family's connection with ourselves, so I went into the churchyard and stood for a little while by the graves. Cousin Gaston lies there with Sis beside him, and B.'s grandmother and grandfather and his mother too. The sun shone down on the old stones, the lettering on his grandmother's stone had been almost effaced. You can only just make out her name.

I thought of the days not so very long ago when we came with the children for the summer. I could see the Abbey of Veslay across the valley and catch a glimpse of the river that flows past the château, but the house and the old tower were hidden by the trees.

We had a long way to go so I didn't stay, but the road was thronged with memories. I saw the children with their donkey cart making for Avignon and the sweetshop where they bought their favorite chocolate peppermints. Their sunny heads and sturdy legs were so vivid that I forgot the flood of refugees "that had come in between."

Fragments of a nation that had come to terms with the enemy to avoid destruction and now was inwardly destroyed, glimpses into the life of a people that had purchased peace at a price and now could not hope for peace even when the war was ended. Gradually I put the fragments together, carefully I felt my way back into the past searching for buried treasure, for the France I had known; here and there I found it.

I went several times to Paris between January and that last unhappy week in June. One could be comfortable enough there on military service billeted at the excellent small Hotel Vendôme where we ate British Army rations, and if one kept to one's own people or to old friends in the division, there was nothing to distress one. But outside the circles of the army or the Embassy there was little to comfort or reassure me. I am aware that not all my fellow countrymen and women felt as I did. There were those who seemed to think the past was dead, that it didn't matter what our former charming friends had felt about the Germans. If their conduct had not been too outrageous one must ignore it and forgive. France was sick. Everywhere I heard the phrase, "*La France est malade.*" She must be nursed gently

back to health and sanity. I did not disagree about the sickness but to me the past was living, the most living and vital element in her languid and diseased organism. Nothing worked, nothing functioned, it seemed to me, but the past. The furnaces and factories were cold, the electric lights went out, the trains didn't run and the shops were empty behind their showy windows, but the past was alive and throbbing in the streets, it was creeping up and down the stairs, it looked out of a million eyes.

Cunning, sly, insidious and subtle, like a shameful secret or a hidden vice or again a microbe in the blood; it was at its work, eating the heart out of the nation, whispering, "You are cold and hungry, you were much better off before. The Germans weren't so bad; true, they took away your riches but you were cleverer than they thought. You managed, you can do it again. You learned to lie and cheat, to trick the enemy, what's wrong with going on as before? The people? Who are the people? They are the enemy, you and your family are all that matter. Every man for himself now, let's have no more talk about the people. *Liberté, égalité*, yes, if you care for words, but not *fraternité*."

De Gaulle presumably was out to kill the past. His methods were primitive but not gentle. How could they be? The basis of his character is pride. Not difficult to imagine his seething fury. He would be acting out of hatred—hatred against the Allies to whom he was indebted for his country's liberation and who were in occupation of the broken humiliated land, hatred against his own soiled unrepentant people, hatred of the past that clung about and clogged his heels.

The prisons, it seemed, were full. Pétain and all his colleagues would come up for trial. France would be clean again, De Gaulle would clean it. And yet the thing seemed to be beyond him. Obsessed by pride he could think of nothing but prestige and how to restore it. The army was apparently his one solution. Military parades to please the Paris mob, make them believe again in the might of France. Military pageants may possibly do something to restore a nation's self-respect, they won't fill children's stomachs, nor would the new ever more swollen army light the fires in the factories and mend the roads. De Gaulle was not beloved. The nation was not grateful. He had come but not alone and he was not after all a savior. He was a tyrant, feared, respected, but without friends as lonely now as he had ever been in exile and I believe as full of hatred.

This is my reading of him. I didn't see him, but I knew him, and my only intimates at this time were among the men of his own Free French Division.

I kept away from my former peacetime friends; some were in prison for

collaboration, others—but it was better not to ask. I put off again my meeting with the one woman I longed and feared to see, went almost nowhere save on official business. It was strange to live in Paris as if it were a military camp, but that was what it came to. Paris for me was just a military barracks.

I came on Colonel Arèn who had first received me at the *Ministère de la Guerre* in '39 when I arrived with Lady Hadfield. Hearing he was back again I went to see him. He was a general now, medical inspector of the military hospitals of Paris. He had turned commercial traveler during the occupation and sold soda water; it fitted in very well, he said smiling, with his work for the resistance, but he had been near starvation and he showed me a photograph of himself, so emaciated as to be unrecognizable.

General Réquin when he opened his door to me stared as if I were a ghost, but a minute later he had drawn me into his living room and set me down and it was as if nothing had come between his world and mine. I saw him and his wife after that several times, and each time I learned a little more of what life had been for people of their sort in Paris with the Germans. "We felt safe," they said, "each day after nine o'clock in the morning until six the following morning. The Gestapo always made their arrests before nine." Or "We used to go to a little restaurant opposite every day at noon, in that way we could be sure of one fairly solid meal a day. It was always crowded but quite silent, no one in the restaurant ever spoke."

And then one day someone said to me, "Do you remember Professor Pernot and his family?" And I said, "But of course, they took us in for the night at Torteron, where are they? Are they here? Can I see them?" And she said, "Yes, we were talking of you the other day, they wondered if you would remember."

"How could I forget, they were so kind, so delightful. They had a charming house, all sunshine and open windows. There were the two old people and two daughters and two small children. They were leaving. I begged them not to go but they insisted, we saw them drive away and I have often wondered if they reached their journey's end."

"The house was pillaged, the unmarried daughter murdered by the Germans. The house was at the exact line of demarcation between the occupied and unoccupied zones. Both girls joined the resistance. Lenio, the younger, went back to Torteron, her sister went to Paris. Between them they arranged the escape of many British aviators, then Lenio was denounced."

Clearly the girl's slender face came back to me, as I had seen it that lovely, dreadful afternoon in June. It was fine and sensitive, the nose was high-bridged, the cheeks were thin, the sun was on it and the eyes were sad.

"We look to England," she had said, "to save us."

A frail gentle creature, with the high forehead of an intellectual, and sweet bloodless lips. Killed by the Germans.

"Can I go to see them?"

"They would like to see you."

So I found them again, the Constant Nymph's family in a small apartment in Paris that suggested very straitened circumstances. Gentle people.

I would have recognized the professor with his little white beard who had raised his hat to me long ago outside the village café in Torteron, but I wouldn't have known the mother. Her hair was white, her face ravaged, her beauty gone, and when we spoke of the Germans she began to tremble violently in her chair and lifting her worn transparent hands, she cried out in anguished rage against them. But they talked quietly of Lenio who was dead.

"She was always delicate," they said. "For us the principal traits in her character were her devotion to her family and her friends, and the energy of her perpetual struggle against ill health. She was born in 1909. Her name was Hélène but we called her Lenio. She had a weak chest and was obliged to spend three winters at Briançon because of her lungs. She was an expert photographer and her father's invaluable helper in photographing manuscripts. Before the war she obtained her Red Cross diploma, a permit to drive heavy trucks and had begun to learn to be a pilot; she had to stop flying when war was declared as the authorities forbade the training of women, so she joined the Red Cross service of the air force.

"After the debacle of 1940 she accompanied her family to the south, yes, we reached our destination, then returned to Torteron to continue the struggle against the Germans. It was then that the inhabitants got to know her in a new guise, undertaking all sorts of different occupations. Some may have suspected that she belonged to the resistance. For a time she looked after the sick and wounded Maquis. Then she began piloting aviators to Paris. She was arrested on the ninth of May. The last word she sent us hidden in her linen was from Bourges. 'We are leaving, our hearts serene.' She had a friend with her called Renée Fruillarde, they were arrested and died at the same time. We had news from the gendarmes of Bourges that she had been taken to Romainville, then to Saarbrücken on the seventh of July, and the horrors of the camp began. She was in command there of her group of three hundred women, all in one room. They all talk of her courage and discipline. On July 23 they left for Ravensburg. There she had her head shaved and took it as a joke, as a result she had sunstroke, with high fever, but in spite of this was forced to do various kinds of manual labor, sawing wood, stone breaking for the roads. In September, departure again for the underground factory

at Waldba. Terracing after that with her feet in water, no shoes, food nonexistent. Her comrades still talk of her courage and energy but she coughed and was terribly emaciated. On January 22 she returned with Renée to Ravensburg in what they called a black convoy, as sick, unfit for work. They were condemned from this moment. Their former comrades didn't recognize them. On the twenty-sixth one of them ran across the camp to take Lenio some underlinen, she was so weak that she could only thank her friend with her eyes. On the twenty-eighth she left with Renée for what they called the *Jugend Lager* where they were put to knitting, but on February 5 their cotton jackets were taken from them, they were left with only a thin cotton smock, and were given a cup of soup a day as nourishment. A few days later Lenio was admitted to the infirmary, a shed with straw mattresses where she was finished off with a pill in the evening; her friend was gassed the same day."

Brave, ardent, constant Hélène Pernot, called Lenio by those who loved her, and of whom, though I only met her once in that sunny room overlooking the valley of the Loire, I am one.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### I

**I**T IS strange to reflect how happy the unit was during the last weeks of the European war, and on how little any of us suspected the sudden twist General de Gaulle was going to give to the end of our service with his troops. The adventures of our hospital have made a long story, but were they compressed into a thriller, not even Agatha Christie, that past mistress of the surprising denouement, could have invented a more unexpected ending.

Letters that got lost, news that was not printed in the local press of the Riviera, a wireless that broke down and my habit of becoming absorbed in the task in hand to the exclusion of all else; everything conspired to keep me in ignorance of what was preparing. I might have guessed, I didn't. I carried on, like a blind woman, doing what it seemed I had to do, still obsessed by a sense of loyalty to the 1st Free French Division who had fought with us from the beginning and were receiving small thanks for what they had done, from the French nation. The thing was there for all to see on the Côte d'Azur. It glared from the smiling foolish shore.

We were as cut off from the outside world as shipwrecked mariners from a luxury liner on a desert island. But the liner seemed to have come ashore with us and we were still aboard her. That was the feeling of the Hotel Bristol in Beaulieu. The great caravansary adapted itself well to the needs of our hospital. The reception rooms, dining halls and card rooms made excellent wards. The first floor could accommodate all the offices, Germaine Sablon's foyer and an overflow of patients while the three floors above housed very comfortably the entire personnel, providing separate bedrooms with baths attached for almost all the girls, and a fine suite for me. But there was just enough wrong to give the whole an atmosphere dreamlike, ephemeral and slightly mad. The bathrooms were superb with white tiles and porcelain tubs, they conjured up visions of lovely ladies enveloped in scented steam; but they were void of hot water and sometimes of cold; the windows gave on a pleasant aspect of palms and blue sea, but many panes were broken, and there were no curtains to keep out the hot afternoon sun; here and there

the ceiling had come down. It was, for all its grandeur, faintly reminiscent of that old derelict casino in Malo-les-Bains, Dunkirk, in 1914. Just enough so to make me feel, as I passed from bed to bed talking to one patient after another in the language I had learned so long ago, that the clock had been put back thirty years—or more exactly twenty-five—and that I was entering on my tenth year of service with the French Army. Four years in the last war, five in this, they merged into a single whole and held me bound, a prisoner of habit and associations.

So many hospitals and all of them essentially the same. A convent in Lorraine, another at Deraa in Syria, a great broken building in Tobruk, our tents at Bir Hakim, Sidi Bouali, Lake Bolsena, the battered walls or flapping canvas made no difference, there had been only one "Ambulance Hadfield-Spears." A place of refuge, a resting place, but dramatic, at a crossroads between life and death, a place of suffering and laughter that defied it, of torn bodies and trusting eyes, of death defeated by unwavering vigilance, a happy place where men felt safe.

Many wounded came to the Hotel Bristol. The great rooms were filled and emptied, filled again day after day. For the last campaign of the division in the Alpes Maritimes was very costly. It was a case of pursuing the enemy across the mountains over icebound tracks, through snowstorms, and the transport of the wounded down the slopes to our advanced unit in the hills was painfully and dangerously slow. No ambulance could reach within miles of the fighting. The stretcher-bearers had to climb and find the fallen, then bring them down; sometimes it took six hours, sometimes more to reach the road. Our patients would arrive half frozen and in the last stages of exhaustion. Such a pretty spot for picnics, one reached it by the sort of road advertised by travel agents. But the travelers who found their way to us at Beaulieu did not admire the scenery.

A heartless country. The road ran down the valley of the Var into Nice. I would leave behind me in the mountains a scene of carnage, a squalid building filled with stretchers, a dingy room where men were dying, Kelsey swaying on her feet, her eyes staring with fatigue, young Hélène Rousseau holding down a delirious man in bed, the surgeons cutting into mangled flesh, and suddenly, there was the sea grinning at me and a promenade crowded with dark sleek young men in flannels, peroxide blondes with varnished toenails, cafés filled with American troops on leave, flash sports cars tearing down the road to Cannes.

The G.I.'s. took their ease here. When they came to Nice they left the war behind. Not so the French. They were carrying on the conflict from the cafés and the villas. The cafés didn't like it. They resented the Foreign

Legion, the legion couldn't pay a thousand francs a bottle for champagne. Heroes? The cafés were not interested in heroes. The war was a thing to be exploited. Of the four invading armies, Italian, German, American and French, which had succeeded each other on the coast since '39, the Free French were by a long way the most unpopular; they were the poorest.

I do not want to be unjust to the motley populace of the *Midi*. There were many people starving, I discovered, behind the palms and hydrangeas of the small neglected gardens. Anyone too poor to buy under the counter went begging. The land produced no food, only flowers. A barren country heavy with the scent of jasmine, carnations, roses, but without means of sustenance, to me it was a nightmare.

Some folk were kind. Thanks to Germaine the news got round that Beaulieu's smartest hotel, once the haunt of millionaires, was filled with wounded, and people came with flowers and fruit and wine for the patients. But a thousand aged British subjects stranded in this perfumed land were starving until the British Red Cross in Paris could send them such parcels through the harassed British consul as were sent to prisoners of war.

Camped in the middle of this cruel splendor of sunshine and blue sea, of crowded night clubs and desolate small kitchens, we carried on with our nursing but even that was unusually cruel. For no one could say what had been gained by the costly battle. Indeed there were some in the division who declared bluntly that nothing had been achieved, that the attack across the mountains had been quite unnecessary, that the enemy would have been obliged to withdraw when the British and American armies advanced through north Italy to Turin, Milan and the Brenner even if the French in our sector had not fired a shot or sacrificed a man.

To judge of this was not our business, ours was to deal as always with the backwash of battle and we were doing it as efficiently as ever. The unit had not gone back to its old compact form, that was impossible, the hospital was larger than ever, but it had settled down; the dynamo was purring, the wheels turned smoothly.

Jean to my regret had gone, taking her husband with her, and I had done a little weeding out. That had been difficult. The colonel was very bad, bless his heart, at saying "No" or "Go." We had all but quarreled on one or two occasions, but he had given way in one case, I in another, and the result if not ideal was good. I knew it when I did my morning round. The English sisters as they moved quickly and quietly from bed to bed wore their best expression of fierce concentration until, with great content, the patients were as good as gold. Upstairs Françoise and Franchette were coping valiantly with a steady stream of lightly wounded, and our new surgeons seemed to be



no longer strangers but old friends. If T. W. snorts when she reads these lines, I can only tell her what I told her then, that I was satisfied. The volume of work done was enormous, the quality was high, the old spirit of the unit had survived and had leavened the new lump. The war meantime was rushing to an end.

On May the second Berlin surrendered to the Russians, and British and Russian forces linked up in the Baltic; Hamburg was captured by the British on the third; the American Army crossed the Brenner on the fourth, and on the seventh all German forces surrendered unconditionally; it was over.

We felt no uplift, only a sense of dreary anticlimax. We said, "How wonderful!" We tried to feel what women felt who were waiting for their husbands, sons and lovers to come home. We told ourselves—but it was useless. The conflict had not ended on a great surging wave of triumph. Perhaps in Paris and London it was different. Here on the Riviera we were as flat as pricked balloons, and felt about as useless. Rosie and I spent the evening of VE-Day alone in my sitting room listening to the feeble celebrations of the populace that had had no interest in the war, and longed to be back in Tobruk, some place that was alive and brave.

The colonel came next day with a pile of papers and we took stock of the unit's achievement. We had reached a total of twenty thousand patients, had never been in repose, but continually during the four years had been either at work or on our way to a new camping ground. To maintain our high standard of efficiency and end the war with an unbroken record of loyal service had been my goal for the unit; we had attained it.

What now? The staff grew restless. The colonel disappeared in his jeep to Paris on mysterious business. Michael Rowntree came to see me. How long, he asked, would it be before the unit could close down? True, the wards were still full of wounded but they could be sent to base hospitals. It would be months, in some cases years, before they were discharged as fit. He didn't wish to seem impatient, but the boys were wanted for relief work in Europe. If I could fix a date? He would like to fly to Rome next week and confer with the heads of the Friends' Ambulance Unit who were to be there. If he could know before he went how soon his staff would be free, it would help him.

I agreed that we must fix a date for closing down. I said I would discuss the matter with the colonel on his return.

He turned up bubbling over with excitement two days later. Would I go to the Far East? We were asked for. He showed me papers. He had seen the people at the *Ministère des Colonies*. The hospital was wanted, we must stick together, the war was not yet over, we must still carry on. He could not

contemplate going without at least a few of his English nurses. If I agreed he would call for volunteers among the staff. But when? I asked. And how and where? For me it would be, I feared, impossible. I must go back to England for the general election. I had a husband, a son, a damaged house to repair—a private life. He brushed these all aside. There would be time enough to go to England for the election and come back. He begged me to think it over, talk to the girls, refrain at least from saying no. In the meantime we were to move north with the division to the Paris area and take part in a military parade on the eighteenth of June.

Then General Garbet came with General Doyen, who commanded the *Armée des Alpes*, to inspect the hospital and thank me for the services it had rendered. I told them that almost the whole division had passed through our hands and that in many ways we would be sorry to sever our connection with it but that the day would come very soon when the hospital would no longer be needed. Would he let me know? He said yes, but that we must on no account disperse before the eighteenth of June. The review in Paris was not to be a victory parade but a commemoration of the day on which De Gaulle in 1940 had launched his appeal from London to "Fighting France." De Gaulle wished the eighteenth of June to take its place in the annals of the nation along with the fourteenth of July. It was right and proper that my unit should appear with the division on that day. He himself attached importance to this; we would receive our orders.

The girls were all very excited when I told them, but I went to my room and wrote to B. "I don't know," I wrote, "that I want to appear in the parade, since you will not be there. Tell me what you feel about it."

I went out onto my terrace. There would have been no eighteenth of June, I reflected, had a man called General Spears not taken De Gaulle to England in '40.

## II

We had received our movement orders and were packing up when the fighting broke out in Syria at the end of May. The fact was mentioned briefly in the local press. Rachel had a wireless and told me. It must have been on the thirtieth that the French shelled Damascus, but when I went up to her room the following evening to listen in, her battery had run down and her machine was dead.

I was interested of course, but it didn't occur to me that B. or I could be involved. How could I imagine that the fighting between the French and Arabs at the eastern end of the Mediterranean could affect my unit? When I asked the colonel what it was all about he shrugged his shoulders, said

something about "*une sale histoire*" and rushed off shouting for Mike to come and supervise the loading of trucks.

They were being loaded on a careful plan. We had material for four hundred patients, much of it worn and shabby. By selecting the best, we could still provide the full equipment in good condition of a mobile unit of a hundred beds, and this was being packed into the most roadworthy of the trucks, the contents of each truck was listed, the list pasted inside the hood, then the load was to be sealed. I had planned it all with Michael and Bob Harper. The idea was that the trucks should not be touched until they were disembarked at a port in the Far East. I had become involved in the colonel's new venture. Jocelyn Russell, Iris Goodwin, perhaps Rachel were ready to go with me and several of the nurses.

Why I had decided to do this I cannot tell you. I didn't want to go, perhaps that was the reason. An old lesson learned in childhood from some puritanical forebear or spartan Nannie. If you hate the job, do it; if you are afraid, stand up to it. I don't know, I can't explain; but I had promised. I was booked for the Pacific war and was not looking forward to it.

Packing up in Beaulieu was distressing. Looking back I survey a scene of desolate disorder and confusion. This war at least is over and the unit is being untidily dismembered. The great rooms on the ground floor are abandoned, beds and bedding are piled in heaps, the operating room is stripped. Tin boxes, bedrolls, canvas bags are coming down the stairs on the boys' shoulders. Everyone is packing, I am packing. It is hot. It all seems so untidy, no date has yet been settled for closing down.

We might have to open up again, the colonel said, in the area of the division near Paris, but most of the British would be leaving after the eighteenth. We were traveling in convoy, it would take nearly a week. As in the old days, our destination was unknown.

It turned out to be Trieport, a village on the Marne thirty miles from Paris. There were empty villas, a café for the mess, a derelict building for the temporary hospital. I was allotted a furnished *bijou* villa that had housed some German officers, and moved in with Jocelyn and Iris. There was a rich but soiled pink satin quilt on my bed, I could hear the sounds of people bathing in the river from my window.

It was next day when I motored into Paris to see Duff Cooper that I was given for the first time certain facts about the Syrian crisis and learned that General de Gaulle was blaming General Spears for what had happened five months after he had gone. I didn't hear the horrid story of what had actually happened in Damascus until after I reached England. It was only much later that I was told how General Oliva-Roget had shelled the

Syrian Parliament at twenty yards and how his Senegalese troops had hacked the gendarmes to death inside it with their knives. I knew nothing during those days in Paris of the shelling of the Orient Palace Hotel and the death of Major Scott-Nicholson, a friend and former member of the Spears Mission. A French N.C.O. had thrown a hand grenade into the foyer of the hotel and he had bled to death in the cellar before help could reach him. The panic in the crowded city when General Roget's guns started shelling the narrow streets and a plane dropped bombs into the bazaars, the sadism, the ferocity and in the end the futility of the French when the Arabs turned on their attackers, and at last General Paget had to come with a British armored division to establish order and save the French from being massacred—I knew nothing of all this, nor did I read of the séance in the Chamber of Deputies on the fifteenth of June when one speaker after another laid the blame for the ugly business on "Spears" and his secret agents. We were getting ready for the parade on the fifteenth of June, the M.T.C. girls were polishing their cars, the nurses had begun to nurse again, we had one hundred patients in our makeshift hospital, I didn't read the Paris papers and don't know even now how fully they reported the debate.

I didn't go to see Duff Cooper to find out about Damascus, I went to tell him of my plans for the Far East. I had written to De Gaulle on the thirty-first of May, informing him that I was prepared to take the unit to the Pacific theater of war as requested by his Colonial Service if it was needed. The letter had been forwarded by the Embassy and acknowledged by Pavlesky, General de Gaulle's private secretary, but De Gaulle himself hadn't answered and I wanted an answer.

Duff's face wore a curious expression when I told him these things but he said little. He agreed that De Gaulle had had ample time to answer but advised me to do nothing until after the eighteenth.

He handed me a message. It was from B. and was an answer to my letter from Beaulieu about the review. B. used the words he had used in '43 after the Beirut crisis.

"What General de Gaulle thinks of me or what I think of him has nothing to do with the fact that you have served for four years with the division I was instrumental in forming. You must appear on the eighteenth."

I looked at Duff. "You must take part," he said, "in the parade, and mind you fly the British flag."

"We always do. Our badge carries the French and British flags together. I mean to do the same on the staff cars at the review. We are an Anglo-French unit after all."

Then I asked him, almost as an afterthought, what had happened to

Syria. "B. hasn't written me anything about it, I haven't heard from him for weeks, there was almost nothing in the local papers in the south."

"You'd better have this," he said, and he handed me some papers. They were verbatim reports of General de Gaulle's statement to the press on June the second and Mr. Churchill's reply on the fifth in the House of Commons.

I took them back with me to Trieport and read them in my room.

It appeared from De Gaulle's statement that the British had been to blame from the beginning for the troubles in the Levant. When the French went into Syria in '41 it seemed that they had taken British troops with them and that subsequently the British had not allowed France to "sail her ship in Syria" as they had promised. There were unpleasant references to British agents who had stirred up feeling against the French among the Arabs, a statement that the British had armed the Arabs against the French, and in answer to a question De Gaulle had said yes, he had asked for General Spears's recall; if he had asked for the recall of all the undesirable British agents in the States, the list would have been interminable.

I went back to the beginning and read the report again. "When the French went into Syria they had taken British troops with them." That De Gaulle should blame the British for all the trouble in the Levant was nothing new but that he should expect the world to believe that his single Free French Brigade had conducted the operations against the thirty-eight thousand Vichy troops in Syria with the help of a few British was surprising. But there was no mention, I noticed, of any Vichy French troops having been in Syria, nor of the good ship "Providence" that had brought so many of them home. He, De Gaulle, had apparently marched into Syria without opposition, at the head of a French Army, had there encountered some British agents who had stirred up the Arabs against him and had asked for the recall of the most dangerous of the lot, General Spears.

I turned to Winston Churchill's statement in the House of Commons:

I am assured that harm would be done by leaving some of the statements in General de Gaulle's speech to the Press unanswered. The sense of General de Gaulle's speech was to suggest that the whole trouble in the Levant was due to British interference. . . . So far from stirring up agitation, our whole influence has been used in precisely the other direction. I myself impressed upon the Syrian President in Cairo in February, the need of a peaceful settlement. . . . We were successful in persuading the Levant States to open negotiations. . . . They asked the French for their proposals in February. While General Bénét was still in Paris, it became known in the Levant in April that the French intended to send

reinforcements. . . . On the 4th of May I sent a friendly personal message to General de Gaulle. . . . I urged that the reinforcing of French troops at this moment would give the impression that the French were preparing a settlement to be concluded under duress. . . . On May 12th General Bénét returned to Beirut and started his discussions. On the 17th French forces began to arrive, on account of that the Levant States broke off negotiations. . . . Serious fighting broke out in Hama on May 27th.

I need not detail the subsequent spread of disorder. . . . At Homs and Hama there was shelling by the French and the situation got quite out of hand. Disorder spread to Damascus where French shelling began on the evening of 29th of May, into this open and crowded city and continued off and on until the morning of the 31st of May. The official casualty figures for Damascus are; killed gendarmes 80, civilians 400, seriously wounded 500, injured 1,000. . . .

I hope it will be clear from the information given to the House that it is not true, as has been suggested, that we have endeavoured to stir up agitation, but that the very opposite is the truth. . . . My proposal to General de Gaulle to withdraw all our troops as soon as satisfactory arrangements were made which would prevent disorder in Syria and the Lebanon—ought completely to have removed from the French mind the idea that we wished to supplant them or steal their influence. We do not intend to steal the property of anyone in this war.

My mind went back to Damascus. I could see the long wide streets leading to the city, glaring white in the hot sun, the square outside the Orient Palace Hotel where the Arab leaders at one time had used to come to see us. I heard Saadullel Jabri say again, "We will have no treaty with the French," and I began to get the picture as I read. We the British had at last persuaded Chukri Quwatli to negotiate the detested treaty and the French had spoiled it all. They had ruined their chances once again. They had learned nothing and understood nothing. The only argument they believed in was that old one, a display of force. They had tried it in Beirut in '43 and it had failed, they had told De Gaulle that it had failed because of General Spears. Now they had tried it again in Syria and again it had failed, this time horribly and ignominiously, after the shelling of Damascus. The Arabs had risen against them and would have wiped them out had the British not moved in. But the fault was with the British.

Mr. Churchill's speech went on:

Finally I feel that I must answer the insinuation that my honourable and gallant friend the Member for Carlisle was recalled from his post as

His Majesty's Minister at Beirut at the request of General de Gaulle. The reason for which my honourable and gallant friend wished to relinquish his post namely to return to his parliamentary duties before a General Election were fully explained in communiqués issued at the time and the suggestion that he was recalled to please General de Gaulle is entirely unfounded. I may say that my honourable and gallant friend was selected by me for the appointment in the Lebanon because among other qualifications he wears five wound stripes gained in his work as liaison officer between the French and British armies in the last war. He is the last person on whom General de Gaulle should cast reflections because he personally secured General de Gaulle's escape to England from Bordeaux in his motor and aeroplane on the 18th of June 1940.

I put the papers away in an envelope and the envelope into my haversack. My knees were shaking slightly as I sat down on the pink quilted bed. There was nowhere else to sit, the one chair was loaded with overcoats and uniforms. The afternoon sun was streaming in. The room was very hot. A small tawdry alien room. It was filled with my luggage; suitcase, kit bag, bedroll, haversack were stacked on the floor. They looked tired, they had traveled a long way round to get from London to this villa on the Marne. Well, they would reach their journey's end quite soon now. What General de Gaulle said about my husband was of no consequence, but I didn't think that I would drag myself and luggage after all to the Pacific.

There was one visit that I must pay before I left for England and the election in Carlisle. I think it was next day that I at last went to call on the woman I longed and feared to see. My heart thumped as I entered her familiar room. She came to me quickly, took me in her arms and said without preamble, "Tell me, what has B. done to us in Syria?" and I broke down. We talked when I had dried my eyes, almost as we used to do, not quite but almost. I didn't lie to her nor she to me, I tried to tell her the whole story. She listened, she knew I was speaking the truth as I saw it, but her mind was full of another story, she had read it in the French papers, heard it from her friends. I began to see that it was hopeless. She was kind and loving. At the sight of her, the warmth of her greeting, the old familiar feeling had come flooding back, but there was a hidden barrier; she asked questions there was no time to answer. There was too much she didn't know. It was the same with me.

We would talk again, I said, and then again. I would come back. We had so much to say. But not about the war, not yet, some day perhaps, not now. No, it wasn't as it had been. The past was dark behind her level eyes as I came away.

## III

Jocelyn's alarm clock was set for four o'clock on the morning of the eighteenth and we were in our cars outside the mess at five. Our orders were explicit and were accompanied by a drawing of the Avenue de la Grande Armée, the Champs Elysées and the Place de la Concorde. Twelve vehicles were to take part in the parade, plus the colonel's jeep, two rows six abreast. We were part of the division's medical battalion. The colonel would lead alone with Nocitto carrying the unit's flag. Four staff cars would follow driven by four M.T.C. drivers and carrying the *personnel féminin* French and British, the four flanked on either side by a jeep carrying officers. Behind us would come six trucks driven by Michael Rowntree's boys and filled with French N.C.O.'s and orderlies. The vehicles had all been polished till they shone and each bore of course the unit badge painted on the body. The four staff cars carried in addition two small pennants, one British and one French.

The girls were nervous about keeping in line six abreast as they had had no practice but I knew they would come through in fine style and of course they did. T. W. drove me with Rachel beside her; Edith sat with me. Rosie drove the staff car on my right, Jocelyn and Iris the two on my left. We were to divide at the bottom of the Champs Elysées in front of the grandstand and sweep round it in two columns. Each driver had a plan of the route with arrows, and the pavement was clearly marked.

It was ten o'clock when we took our places in the long column of vehicles in the Avenue de la Grande Armée and there we had to wait until noon. It was a cloudless day, there was a fine display of aircraft overhead and I visited about among the girls. They all looked very smart, drivers in khaki, nurses in gray and navy blue. The orderlies too were unbelievably spick-and-span in their newly painted trucks. The modest pennants on the four staff cars fluttered in the breeze. The unit flag was very grand in white satin, Nocitto held it high behind the colonel's head as we moved off.

The pace was fast. It was exciting. Dividing behind the Arc de Triomphe I had a glimpse of Iris' face set like grim death as our two lots came smoothly together and we swept down the Champs Elysées at forty miles an hour between cheering crowds.

It was all over in a flash. But I had time to feel a sudden surge of high emotion as we entered the Place de la Concorde and bore down on General Koenig. He was standing on the pavement well forward in front of the grandstand like the figure on the prow of a ship. As the cavalcade swept down upon him it looked as if it would submerge him, but it divided in two



waves. He was a ship's emblem dividing a sea of iron. De Gaulle was high behind him on the grandstand with the white-robed Sultan of Morocco beside him. I had a fleeting vision of a crowd of faces, and suddenly another vision of a barracks square in England in 1940 with the Foreign Legion on parade, and the King of England walking through the sun with De Gaulle and General Spears. I realized in one intense lightning moment all that had been achieved since that day when the governor of Paris and the head of the French state were Captain Koenig and De Gaulle, an exile, almost unknown to his own people, and I was wonderfully glad.

It was at this moment, I learned afterwards, that De Gaulle caught sight of our small pennants and summoned Koenig, who came running up the steps, and asked him what unit it was that had passed carrying the British flag. When Koenig told him it was Lady Spears's hospital, he turned to the Minister of War who stood behind him and gave orders then and there that the unit was to be closed down immediately and its British members repatriated without delay. There was a group of our old patients standing at the end of the Champs Elysées opposite the grandstand. They had brought themselves from the Val de Grace, some on crutches, some with arms in plaster, some with bandaged hands, to see the division pass, and when they recognized the girls and their own English nurses they shouted, "Voilà Spears, Vive Spears." People said that De Gaulle must have heard their voices and that the sound added to his anger. I don't know, I didn't hear or see them, they were on the left, my car swept round to the right, but Jocelyn and Iris saw and heard them and the nurses in their cars with Germaine Sablon and Françoise and Franchette all waved to them as they flew past.

I didn't know what had happened until the twentieth. I had moved into the Hotel Vendôme in Paris and had arranged to go with the colonel that morning to the *Ministère des Colonies* to see the medical inspector about the proposed expedition to the Pacific. I had nerved myself to tell the colonel that the equipment of the hospital was his to dispose of or take with him but that I could not go myself. The effort wasn't necessary. "Everything is changed," he said abruptly as he came in. "There's no point in going to the Ministry. The Far East is off, I shan't go."

"What has happened?" He told me.

The Minister of War, Monsieur Diethelm, had acted immediately on his instructions and had written a letter to the Divisional Staff which was received at his headquarters on the nineteenth. It said that General de Gaulle had been very disagreeably surprised at seeing the British flag on the cars of H.C.M. 3, *Ambulance Hadfield-Spears*, and ordered the hospital to be closed down on the twenty-first and the British personnel sent home without

delay. I was not given a copy of this letter and never saw it. I merely received a military order on the twentieth stating that the hospital was to close down the next day. The reaction of our doctors and surgeons went some way to comfort me. They declared that had they known what was going to happen they would have insisted on carrying the British flag on their jeeps and on the trucks, and the division rallied to us. They were shocked in the division at the way we had been treated, a good many officers were very angry when they heard the news. Three *Fusiliers Marins* who were great friends rushed in that same afternoon to General de Gaulle's private office to protest, and the regiment gave us a farewell party at the French Officers' Club on the twenty-second the night before we left.

There were other protests, from divisional headquarters, from the legion, from the diplomatic corps. Duff Cooper said when I informed him of what had happened that he was not at all surprised. It seemed that some thirty high-ranking British officers had been invited by De Gaulle to come down from Germany and Belgium to attend the review and receive French decorations. He had withdrawn the invitation the week before and had since refused to allow a similar group of French officers, among whom General Catroux was one, to receive the British decorations that the Ambassador was to have conferred on them. It was even rumored that De Gaulle had not wanted to invite the British Ambassador himself to the review and had only done so after a sharp clash with General Koenig on the subject. It was clear that the rude action to my unit and myself was but a part of a wider gesture against Great Britain. A pitiable business when a great man suddenly becomes small.

It was of course impossible to carry out our sudden orders and close down the day after we received them. Kelsey and the French nurses arranged to stay on with the colonel and see to the orderly evacuation of the patients. Jocelyn would remain as my representative and hand over the equipment. I gave it to the colonel to be used as he thought best for the division. We left on Saturday the twenty-third. The bulk of the unit were going by road to Dieppe and the Legion saw them off at Trilport at seven in the morning. They sent a military band and many officers came to say good-by to "Spears." I left alone by air as I was already a week late for the election campaign in England and proceeded straight to Carlisle. I had written to De Gaulle on the twenty-first in Paris, protesting against his action, not on my behalf or that of the British volunteers, but on behalf of our French officers, who took the sudden closing of the hospital as a punishment and were actually being punished for having collaborated loyally with me for many arduous months; with some our association had lasted indeed for four years. It was in Carlisle

that I received the following letter from General de Gaulle. It is dated the twenty-seventh and was given on the twenty-seventh to the press, but I received it only on the Fourth of July.

Dear Madame,

The dissolution of the Hadfield-Spears Ambulance was announced as the result of a decision taken on the 6th of last June and which applies to six of the nine mobile surgical units belonging to the Army Medical Service.

It is in no sense the result of facts cited in your letter of the 21st of June and I am astonished that you could have attributed to it, a discourtesy on my part.

On numerous occasions I myself and the authorities on whom you depended have publicly recognized the value of the services rendered by your Unit.

Once more I make it a pleasure to state the importance and the quality of these services and beg you to transmit the expression of my lively gratitude to the personnel which under your orders, has gained the most solid titles to the friendship of the French army.

I beg you dear Madame to accept my respectful compliments.

(Signed) C. de Gaulle

My answer closes this story.

Crown and Mitre Hotel,  
Carlisle  
July 5, 1945

General de Gaulle  
General,

I will be glad to inform my staff of your expression of gratitude for the services they rendered your troops.

I must remind you, however, that at the request of your medical authorities I agreed to take my unit to the Far East with your Expeditionary Force, and informed you of this offer in a letter delivered to your office on May 31st by His Majesty's Minister in Paris. Receipt of my letter was acknowledged by your Secretary, M. Pavlesky, but I heard nothing further until suddenly on June 20th I received a military order dated June 19 closing my unit on the 22nd.

We had reopened our hospital in the area of the 1st Free French Division at the orders of our Divisional Commander, and having heard nothing of the decision, which you say was taken on June 6, to disband our unit, were looking after 100 patients. To evacuate these patients and

close down in two days was a physical impossibility and an unheard of procedure. Indeed the order was one of such brutality that it was in the nature of a punishment to our French officers and required an explanation.

The explanation given was as I stated in my letter of June 21, and was to the effect that you had been displeased at seeing the British flag flying with the French flag on my cars in the parade. The statement was made, according to my information, by your Minister of War in a letter to our Divisional Commander, and the fact of your displeasure is corroborated in a message from Paris that has appeared in the British press accusing my unit of unfurling the Union Jack as we passed your stand and shouting "Vive Spears, vive les Anglais."

We unfurled no British flag. We passed before you in silence. The shout "Vive Spears" came from a group of our old patients who had arranged to come on their crutches from their Paris hospital to see the parade. It was a spontaneous expression of the gratitude and devotion to their English nurses, for it is by the name of Spears that the unit is known and loved in the Division.

I would add finally that the gratitude of the Division and the affection of our 20,000 patients is a sufficient recompense to us for the service we were able to render to your troops.

From you I have had no recognition since February, 1941, when you inspected the unit on its departure for the Middle East, until today, but I know that I am speaking for my entire British staff when I say that our four years with the 1st Free French Division has bound us to the officers and men of that division with bonds that can never be broken.























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